

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:14

Read Luke 2 and imagine what those shepherds must have felt. We, at the Association for a More Just Society (AJS), can physically sympathize with them; even in Tegucigalpa, the air's chilly. But it goes deeper. The shepherds must have felt restless, nervous, a bit afraid, wondering what ferocious animal or malicious bandit lurked just beyond the firelight.

That's what living in Honduras often feels like, even in broad daylight. Violence, corruption, poverty, fear and despair often plague us.

But in the midst of those shepherds' dark night, suddenly the sky ignites. The glory of the Lord shines. The heavens are filled with numberless angels singing God's praise. And then darkness once more engulfs the shepherds. But that moment's brilliance is burned into the retina of their minds. It fundamentally changes their view of the world. It gives them the hope to do something audacious, to go out and find this Christ and share the good news with all they meet.

Here in Honduras, slender but dazzling rays of hope have also punched through the year's darkness. We have seen many big-picture breakthroughs: changes in the president's cabinet, his attitude, and his policies; numbers of land-titles issued; investigative articles published; and rape survivors aided.

But let's focus on one particular beam of glory named Henry. An eighteen-year-old from the rough neighborhood of Villa Nueva, Henry spent most of his time on street corners in unsavory company — one more among nearly a million Honduran young people who neither work nor are in school, the tinder stoking the fire of crime and violence.

About this time last year, one of our youth outreach workers, Betzabé, had the guts to approach Henry and get him enrolled in a carpentry class. It was a rocky go. Henry showed up late and mouthed off to his instructor. But Betzabé stuck with him. She convinced both him and his father to attend counseling sessions with one of our psychologists. She urged Henry to give church a try.

Henry listened. On July 6, he was baptized at the Prince of Peace Church a few blocks from his home. He's arriving on time and paying attention in his carpentry class. He recently told Betzabé, "This is the best year of my life."

For that moment of brilliance amidst the darkness we say, "Glory to God in the highest."

Pray

As you hope for peace and justice in this world, give thanks to God for those moments where the sky ignites and the glory of the Lord shines in. How can you be one of the rays of hope punching through the darkness? In what ways can you audaciously go out and share the good news? How can you join the host that sings out emphatically that justice can be done in Honduras and throughout the world?

The Association for a More Just Society (AJS) is a Christian organization dedicated to supporting justice efforts in Honduras, carried out by our partner organization *Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa*, and inspiring Christians in North America to follow God's call to "Do Justice." AJS is supported by World Renew, CRWM, and the OSJ.

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD — and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness he will judge the needy; with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist."

Isaiah 11: 1-5

What I saw on a billboard one icy morning on my way to work struck a chord in me: **"Worried about how much you'll eat this holiday? Others are too!"**¹ The billboard plays off the nagging North American narrative of overabundance and weight gain during the holidays, turning the message on its head to raise awareness of hunger, poverty, and the work of a local homeless shelter and soup kitchen. The billboard's clever words echo the disparities in this world and reflect what Advent is all about, namely the promise and prophecy in Isaiah 11. As the Advent season celebrates the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in His first coming, it also symbolizes the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth, justice and righteousness over His people.

Tonight, two hundred million children will go to bed hungry. Close to 19,000 children will die **today** (and every other day — the equivalent of 38 jumbo jets full of children under 5 crashing *every day*). Most of these children are from the developing world, and their deaths are caused by weak bodies which are unable to fight disease, constant exposure to pollutants in the environment where they live, and a lack of resources like safe water and access to health care. Millions more children risk death because of poverty and malnutrition.

I was witness to this dreadfulness for decades while living and working in impoverished countries and conflict areas; I can still picture in my mind disadvantaged children who succumbed to diseases, countless almost-lifeless bodies beyond healing, later dying before my eyes in the hospitals and facilities where I had worked. These senseless deaths could have been prevented by low-cost interventions, medicines that would cost mere cents, basic solutions which simply were not available in their households and communities or were just beyond the families' means. The health of millions of children is affected by inequities in the geographic location of their residences, their ethnicity, their socioeconomic status, and their lack of access to basic necessities such as clean water.

The spirit of Advent embodies anticipation, expectation, and longing. These children's voices and faces are cries for deliverance from the sufferings in this world. Advent reminds us that God has heard these cries. The purpose of Christ's coming to this world is to provide hope, the hope that as He came to us as infant, He will come again in the second coming as king.

We too can be the messengers of hope — breaking down invisible walls, tearing down "borders", constructing "bridges", giving our time. We can be the light of hope in the darkness, concerned with those who live in poverty, their daily sufferings, and the compromised health and unnecessary deaths that are far too often the result, especially among children. We can be the voice of those unheard and unrepresented, empowering people and communities and asserting human dignity. To have hope is to believe in and to affirm the possibility of a whole new world; a world without suffering, hunger, injustice, discrimination and preventable illnesses and deaths. To have hope is to believe that Love will overcome and triumph above all.

Alan Talens, MD, MPH is the Health Advisor of CRWRC/World Renew. He backstops the USAID/World Renew -funded Child Survival Programs in India and Bangladesh. He has worked as a physician in the Philippines and the Marshall Islands for 2 decades, and has provided public health support in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Honduras, and Indonesia.

¹ Mel Trotter Ministries Billboard at 28th Street; Grand Rapids, Michigan

"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

John 8:12

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Matthew 5:16

His name was John. John means "love". John was a disciple of Jesus who worked for World Renew in Uganda during the early years of ministry there. John and his wife Ihla loved Ugandans. So great was their love that they personally mentored several individuals who were vulnerable or victims of poverty and injustice. One was a young girl, Emily, who they took into their home, supporting her every need for food, education, and shelter as she helped them with domestic chores. When she was raped and became pregnant, they gave her comfort and provided care for her son. They taught her how to bake and run a business. Eventually she was able to live on her own in her own house built in Arua. Emily saw and embraced Christ's light of love through John and Ihla.

John also deeply loved Christ's body, the church. He worked closely with Gad Bilete, one of the leaders of the department overseeing community development programs of the Church of Uganda. Together they worked tirelessly to train Ugandan church leaders on principles of servant leadership. Together they shared the light of God's truth on issues of injustice and challenged church and community leaders to address them. One of these justice issues included a cultural practice where a woman who lost her husband would be blamed for his death and then her husband's family would come and take all her belongings, sometimes even the house and children. Little did John and Gad realize that this issue would become very personal when Gad died unexpectedly and the church community had to rally around Gad's wife, Philista, to protect her from losing everything else. Philista saw and embraced Christ's light of love through His church.

One memorable night, I travelled from Kampala to the east side of the Nile River expecting to meet John coming from the other side of the river in a canoe so that we could go to a team meeting. But when the canoe came, there was no John. Only a man with a note that said: "John has died in a motor accident. Ihla is injured. Go back to Kampala." In shock and tears, I cried to God as I drove back. And in the pitch black sky, God's comfort came through a bright moon radiating its light over the road along with these verses running through my mind from John 8:12 where Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" and Matthew 5:16: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." I praise God for people like John, Ihla, and Gad who reflected the light of Christ's love. How about you? As you celebrate Christ's birth and life, how are you shining His love?

A prayer from Graham Kendrick's song "Shine Jesus Shine":

*Lord the light of your love is shining,
In the midst of the darkness shining,
Jesus, Light of the World, shine upon us.
Set us free by the truth you now bring us.
Shine on me, shine on me.
Shine, Jesus, shine! Fill this land with the Father's glory.
Blaze, Spirit, blaze! Set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow. Flood the nations with grace and mercy.
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.*

Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo is co-director of World Renew, formerly known as CRWRC.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. "

John 1:5

I met Laz 6 years ago, when he was 15 years old, at a group home for delinquent Native youth. I spent one week with this group of boys and got to know Laz well. The following two summers I went to Laz's home reserve and hung out with him, and I would send him letters during the year. Several summers after that first visit, I learned that he went to jail and wouldn't get out for a few years. I didn't know if I would ever see him again. The summers went by and I didn't ask where Laz was because I knew he was in jail. But this summer on my annual trip, Laz's younger sister told me that Laz really wanted me to come by to see him. I was astonished when I met with Laz that he remembered everything that we did together and what I wrote in letters. While people were concerned that I should be wary of spending time with this delinquent youth, all I saw was a young man who wanted someone to listen to him, to care about him, and to give him a second chance. By spending time with Laz, I saw him as a beautiful person created by God. Many people look at Laz and see darkness, but I see light. I am reminded of the need to see the light in others and not to focus on the darkness.

Yet as a Christian working on a First Nations reserve, I am not only a bearer of Christ's light — I'm also a recipient. One night, while working at a kids camp in Mishkeegogamang, a small group of staff spent the evening with a family in the community. I've spent six summers on this reserve, and I know many of the children and their families. The people are so beautiful, but they have been so hurt by Christians who have told them that they can't be both Native and Christian, so they chose to be Native. As we sat laughing with our friends, one of the older children told us that we had to go outside because the northern lights were out. I had always wanted to see the northern lights and hurried outside with all the children. We all stared at the sky in awe as the lights moved above us until the whole sky was dancing. I was giving a piggy-back ride to a 7-year-old boy and as he stared at the sky he said, "God created all this and it's awesome because God loves us." Then his 5-year-old sister raised her hands to the sky and repeated, "Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me so much."

I am learning to change my outlook. I am learning that it is not only about me sharing my light, but recognizing the light in others. I am learning that, instead of getting lost in issues seen only at a glance, I am called to see people as Jesus created them — beautiful. I am learning that it's in those moments that light can be seen and the darkness is overcome.

Pray:

- *That God will give you the ability to recognize the light in difficult situations.*
- *For the Aboriginal people of Canada; that the light will continue to shine in these communities and that non-Aboriginal people will be able to see their light and learn from them.*

Heather Kooiman works as a nurse in Attawapiskat First Nation and has served as a camp director in Mishkeegogamang First Nation for the past six summers. The stories above come from her experiences living and serving in these places.

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

Colossians 1:19-20

A few years ago, I ran across a contemporary parable of the Kingdom of God that has come to color much of the way I live. A mother and her young daughter are stuck inside on a rainy day. The mother decides that a fun way to spend the afternoon together would be to bake a batch of cookies. So she gets out the flour, butter, eggs, and sugar; places them on the kitchen island along with a mixing bowl and wooden spoon; and begins to recite the recipe to her daughter. The young daughter tries to be helpful, but is mostly anything but. She drops egg shells in the batter, spills flour all over the floor, sneaks fists of chocolate chips when her mother's back is turned, and repeatedly loses interest in the process. The mother, instead of getting angry, patiently picks out the egg shells from the batter, mops the flour off the floor, and repeats step 4 for the third time to her restless daughter. Finally, the cookies make it out of the oven and the mother and daughter sit down to enjoy the fruits of their labor with a glass of milk.

The Kingdom of God is like this. God could consummate his Kingdom with a snap of His fingers. The Earth would be filled of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Justice would roll on like a mighty river, righteousness like a never-failing stream. And yet, He chooses not to do this. For some beautiful, inexplicable reason, God chooses to partner with us to usher in the reality of His Kingdom. Like the mother baking cookies, God does not need our help, and yet He desires it. Perhaps it is because God's Kingdom is marked by values beyond efficiency — values like freedom, trust, and patient sanctification. As Christians, we are called to be a people who live now in anticipation of the Kingdom, and by so doing are formed into the people of God. Just when we delude ourselves into thinking that it is all up to us, we drop an egg shell into the batter, and God patiently picks it out.

We cannot do everything, and instead of being discouraged by this, we find great freedom. This allows us to do something, and to do it to the best of our abilities. We know that it is small and incomplete, but it is a start: an opportunity for God's grace to enter and to do the rest. So as you continue to work for justice in the midst of the present darkness of this world, remember that spilling flour comes with the territory. But every time we make a mess of the work of redemption, God is never far behind, sanctifying our efforts, steadily bringing His Kingdom, and thoroughly enjoying the process.

A Franciscan Blessing

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may wish for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Kyle Schaap is the policy analyst and advocacy fellow at the CRC Office of Social Justice

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John 1:5

For over forty years, the people of Romania lived under one of the most oppressive Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. During that era over a half-million Romanians became informants to the secret police, which was responsible for the arrests, torture, and deaths of thousands. Forced labor for the state, frequent utility outages, and chronic food shortages were the way of life for Romanians for decades. On Christmas day, 1989, dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena were executed, thus marking the fall of communism in Romania. But the country still bears the scars.

Romania is a beautiful country, struggling to develop and gain access to the modern world. The effects of almost half a century of communist rule – and all the accompanying social distrust, civic apathy, and corruption – have left Romania straining to shed a dark past. Corruption is persistent and endemic in almost all public institutions, from government to education to healthcare. The economy is weak, saddled with decades of debt from the excesses of the Ceaușescu dictatorship. Hope is sometimes hard to see. And yet, light is peeking in.

Fundația Noi Orizonturi (New Horizons Foundation, or FNO) is an organization dedicated to undoing the effects of communism in the next generation of Romanians. Through programs incorporating experiential education, service-learning, and asset-based community development, FNO has helped spread hope and light across the country, driving out the lingering shadows of communism. FNO has become one of the largest youth movements in the country, and the youth in the programs are truly being transformed – and in the process transforming the world around them.

God is at work in Romania. Christ, the light of the world, is at work through FNO and countless other organizations. In tangible, beautiful, and hopeful ways, this work of light is beating back the darkness of communism, of broken communities, of distrust and apathy, of fear and defeat. The light is still shining in the darkness – a light completely incomprehensible to the way of distrust, isolation, and corruption. This light builds relationships. This light heals communities. This light repairs broken social ties. This light holds leaders accountable. This light lifts up the poor and heavy-laden and promises peace, joy, and rest. This light is the antithesis to the ugly scars of communism – and this light is winning. FNO is merely a witness to the light: a light that cannot be understood by darkness and cannot be defeated.

Prayer

Dear and faithful God, thank you for being so actively at work in Romania! We are grateful for the glimpses we see of your Kingdom coming in this country, and are eager for the day when all Romanians will see Your light. Please bless the work of FNO and your people who are working as witnesses to Your light in a place that has experienced so much darkness. We know that Your Kingdom cannot be understood or overcome by the darkness, and we are so thankful. In this season of waiting for Christmas, may we be daily reminded to wait in eager anticipation for the day when Your Son, the light of the world, will return and make all things right and new. Thank You for that promise! Amen.

Kelly Organ is a staff member at the Office of Social Justice. In January, she and her husband Jack are moving to Lupeni, Romania through Christian Reformed World Missions to work with Fundația Noi Orizonturi.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26-28

"This is darkness: women are nothing," explains Kohima Daring, a World Renew staff member from Bangladesh. "Women are not the decision-makers; they are not allowed. They say women are born to be under a guardian. Women have no decision-making rights, no voice, no literacy. Everything is decided by the husband, but for everything the women are blamed."

Women are often forced to marry as young as 13 or 14 in Bangladesh, wedded to a man chosen by their parents who they see for the first time on their wedding day. Parents pay a dowry to the groom for taking their daughter – essentially selling her – and girls with darker skin cost the parents more. Abuse and beating are common, and high infant and maternal mortality rates are a direct result of the early age of forced marriage. In addition, Kohima says, male children are highly prioritized, and women are the ones blamed if no children can be had, or if a couple only has girls.

If a husband is displeased with his wife, or if his parents disapprove of their daughter-in-law, men are often encouraged to get divorced. The woman has no say in this, Kohima explains. "If you are divorced, in the whole society you will be known as a bad woman. You won't be accepted anywhere." Many divorced women end up on the streets begging or working as prostitutes, often accompanied by their children, whose lives are destabilized by poverty and homelessness. In a society with very few Christians, Kohima laments the fate of so many women and children who are viewed as worthless, with nothing to offer.

Yet the witness of World Renew's work in Bangladesh, she says, is in part to help women recognize what they have to offer through the work of partnering Christian community development organizations. "In a Muslim country, it is hard to find out the ways that we can help the community to be a transformative community," Kohima explains. But when they ask women who have gone through their literacy programs about the changes they see, they say things like, "We didn't know our neighbors; we didn't know each other. Now we are united!"

The empowering effects of literacy classes for women have extended far beyond the ability to read. Women are working together to become entrepreneurs, establish cooperatives, form micro-lending organizations, and create support groups. Kohima adds, "They say, 'When we had no literacy, we were blind; now we can see.' We are going there hoping to help them realize that these are their gifts from God. Because everybody has gifts from God: every person, every family, every community. So the goal is that, from our work, people will realize their gifts from God, and then think together, how do they use their gifts from God?"

Kohima's face lights up as she finishes. "I believe everything is possible with God's guidance and blessings. So then God will give us the wisdom to find the ways to work and to proclaim the good news through our work. Because as God said, we are to serve his Kingdom with word and deed. And where we cannot tell very much openly, through our work we are proclaiming him. Sometimes it is hard, but we work so that they will see His full Kingdom. And I think this is light!"

Pray:

- Pray for the partner agencies of World Renew in Bangladesh. There are few Christian development agencies in the country; pray for wisdom for their staff and acceptance of their work in a sometimes-hostile environment.
- Pray for the ongoing work of women's empowerment and the reduction of infant and maternal mortality rates.
- Pray for the light of Christ to shine brightly in the darkness of the world, particularly in Bangladesh.

Kohima Daring is the Country Consultant for World Renew in Bangladesh. She specializes in community and organizational capacity development, literacy, and non formal education.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor...

Isaiah 9:6

A counselor in biblical times was one who sat on the king's counsel – one who gave advice, often the one who could best strategize and plan the course ahead.

Wonderful, in Hebrew, doesn't mean "super great," like we use the word today. Instead, wonderful can mean "beyond our understanding," or "difficult to comprehend."

I'm no Hebrew scholar, but I like this pairing of words. I like the notion that this child is the one who has a trusted plan. And my experience has shown that this plan is decidedly difficult to understand.

Isaiah, in the midst of dark, foreboding words to the king that precede this passage – warnings of coming occupation, oppression, war, and separation from God – changes course in chapter 9. Suddenly he is saying to the people, "Look, I know it's bad. But wait for it! You'll see it soon! It's hard to understand, it's a mysterious plan, but it's wonderful and hopeful and it's coming. "

Anne Lamott famously has said the best two prayers are "Thank you thank you thank you," and "Help me help me help me." As people who seek justice, who find ourselves burdened by the oppression in the world, I bet we tend to go heavier on the "help me" prayers – the begging, hope-against-hope prayers in the midst of Isaiah-grade darkness. Against all hope, we beg God to intervene in Egypt and Syria. We beg for an end to HIV and AIDS. We beg for good governance, for the livelihoods of immigrants, for fewer abortions, for education that gives some kind of future. Come Lord Jesus, we beg. Wake up! Fix this!

But Advent is the time when we have to remind ourselves, in the midst of these fervent, begging prayers, that God is not our personal assistant. We know that the Gospel does not solve every problem or answer every question. To claim that the one we follow is a "wonderful counselor" does not mean that we miraculously get the right steps, that we get in on the plans, that we get to see how things will turn out in the end. It does not mean that all our prayers get answered right away, in the way we want, in the way we can see.

Instead, God offers us a way to live in the midst of problems that don't disappear. God offers us a way to live without answers. Advent reminds us that we often must wait, and that God acts in God's own time, in God's own ways, and for God's own reasons.

At the time of Jesus' birth, God's faithful were again begging for a king who would prove stronger than the oppressive Roman rule. God did answer their begging prayers, just not in the way they wanted. The king God sent was a baby, born in a barn. He is our wonderful counselor – the one with the plan we can't always understand.

Kate Kooyman is a previous employee of the Office of Social Justice. She currently serves as the Director of Outreach and Social Justice at Hope College in Holland, MI.

...13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod...

Matthew 2:1-18

Sometimes the lunchtime book study group I'm in feels overwhelmed by a mix of emotions — including grief, frustration, and rage. We're studying *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander. It's a book about the incarceration of huge numbers of African Americans in the United States, especially young men, the injustice which feeds it, and the destruction it causes. Some of us are black, some white; some of us have family members and friends in prison, but all of us share to some degree in the horror of what is going on.

We struggle with despair and the sense of helplessness in the face of such a complicated and deep-seated problem. We feel outraged that the church is so complicit, even if just by its silence. Sometimes we feel guilty because we have been, and still are, part of the complacency.

Some of us are involved with the Beyond Prisons advocacy group at the Micah Center here in Grand Rapids, MI. That helps a little. Others are involved in a support group for women intimately affected by mass incarceration. Most of the women in this group have an immediate family member in prison. These actions make a positive contribution, but we know we're just scratching the surface. The deeper questions go into the issues related to the mass incarceration of black people in America today: the injustices of the criminal justice system, the systemic racism which feeds the entire process, the lifelong scars and disenfranchisement borne by those who have done time, their families and larger communities; the deeper questions go into darkness.

Every week when we're wrapping up our time together someone will say something like: "If I didn't have the power of the Holy Spirit supporting me I could not do this." Closing in prayer is not just a formality for us, but something we desperately need.

At the end of the day, maybe this is really all we can say: it's in those deepest, darkest places where we can see Jesus most clearly. But that does not make the darkness light. It shows a way out. It's a hope. But the darkness remains all around us. I value the thought of the little, helpless baby, whose parents had to escape with him to another country because the Powers That Be were out to kill him. Here too was a scene of great darkness, of seemingly unstoppable evil, and yet we know how the story ends.

Next week we'll gather again to discuss the next chapter of *The New Jim Crow*. We'll express our frustration and anger. We'll hurt and wonder how it is possible that such an outrage could be happening right under our noses and why so few people seem to care. Finally, we'll end by reflecting on that baby whose life is the only lifeline we can hold onto as we descend deeper into the horror of the mass incarceration of people of color in America today.

Pray:

Lord, we're thankful that no matter how deep we descend into the darkness of this world, you are at the bottom waiting for us.

Rev. Albert Hamstra is the Global Impact Director for Christian Reformed World Missions.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them

Isaiah 11:6

Most of us dream big. I never hear my five-year-old son say that when he grows up he's going to become an entry-level mail clerk at the local office of the department of National Defense (never mind the fact that he has no idea what that means). He talks about becoming an astronaut who flies rocket ships. When we think about justice or injustice for that matter, so often we speak in the same lofty tones: big talk about the eradication of poverty or the elimination of social injustice in foreign countries. These are good dreams to hold onto and pursue, but so often their achievement begins small... in the mail room, one letter at a time.

C.S. Lewis, in an essay written in 1940 entitled "Why I am Not a Pacifist," (included in *"The Weight of Glory"* and Other Essays) said,

I think the best results are obtained by people who work quietly away at limited objectives, such as the abolition of the slave trade, or prison reform, or factory acts, or tuberculosis, not by those who think they can achieve universal justice, or health, or peace. I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can... just as the dentist who can stop one toothache has deserved better of humanity than all the men who think they have some scheme for producing a perfectly healthy race."

One could argue that Lewis' definition of "limited objectives" was still quite lofty, but his point is good. Our Christian calling begins with small and tangible contexts as a means to a larger end.

It is an Advent approach to justice. The Bible tells the story of God and his redemptive "dream" for the world and for his people. But inside that story, the crux of salvation began not with a grand overture but with a baby born in a stable. The first recipients of the news of God's grace were not those living in the palace of Jerusalem but the local farmers (shepherds) of Bethlehem. Likewise, our calling today begins on the street we live on, our places of employment, and among the people we meet every day. With God, may we during this Advent season dream big, but begin small.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, may we embrace the humility you embodied as we live into your redemptive "dream" for the world. Amen.

Sid Ypma is a Campus Chaplain at the University of Ottawa.

"Put your hope in the LORD, both now and forevermore."

Psalm 131:3

The following is a meditation written on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost, in 2007. It was originally published in Catapult magazine, in an issue on "Hope and Cynicism," in December of 2007.

How providential that I waited until the last minute, that I procrastinated until after Thanksgiving. If I hadn't waited, I might have written about hope and cynicism before experiencing corporate worship on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost, the last week of the Church's calendar year. I might have written without the benefit of this morning's reminders of the truth of Christ's Lordship now and in the coming Kingdom. So thankfully, for better or for worse, my frame has changed, as it should, after time spent worshipping corporately in the presence of God and his people. My approach to thinking about hope and cynicism has shifted from looking at hope through the lens of cynicism to looking at cynicism through the lens of hope.

By hope I am talking about the big Hope, about the Meaning of Life kind of hope. The kind of hope that has an answer to life's biggest questions about purpose and destiny. This kind of hope is the wheat that grows next to the weeds of cynicism – the true next to the lie. But short of that Kingdom in its fullness, I often have a hard time remembering to hope. It is so hard to believe that things will all turn out well in the end – there is too much evidence to the contrary. Violence, apathy, darkness, disease, and death – on most days these and much else lead me to an overpowering cynicism and fear. Is it wrong to feel cynical when Christ's Lordship remains largely unacknowledged? I don't think so. I think there may be some good in this cynicism.

I hope my cynicism has a larger purpose. Recent events have confirmed for me my long-held fundamental belief that sin's reach cuts through the heart of every one of us, as individuals, and more sinisterly, as larger communities. Even communities that are rooted and established in love are not exempt. I deeply love many people and many human communities. In truth though, every one of these people and groups for whom I hold deep love and admiration have failed me, hurt me, and shamed me. And I have done the same to them.

How can this be? And more to the point, how do we find ways forward in a world where the failures of humanity are more real than its faithfulness? For me it boils down to making space for regular reminders of that for which I hope. The reminders come in the form of individual habits and rituals, in addition to habits and rituals observed in human community. The Church (the big one, holy and catholic) is the best place to start for these, but they can also be found in workplaces, homes, and other more private places. A few examples might help.

Each week my church family collectively reasserts our unity with the Church of all times and all places by saying the Apostle's Creed together out loud. We also confess our sin, receive God's pardon, hear the will of God for our lives, and spend time exercising our Kingdom muscles in praise, lament, learning and loving. Just inside the front door of my house we have a photo of a young refugee boy behind barbed wire fencing with the words of reminder, "There is poverty – there is war – there is sickness and death – there is sin and evil throughout the world... but there is a REDEEMER." My family must take this image and these words into account on a daily basis as a reminder of both sin and hope.

A year ago I wrote the following in my journal: "Wars in Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, all in the name of peace. Cynicism and fear make sense in light of bizarre reality. What role can the kingdom play in addressing this global anomie? Hope." I had read Frederick Buechner's recently released collection of sermons and I resonated with Buechner in believing that "without wild and irrational hope, the whole enterprise makes no sense." So I hope for the same reason that Jesus' disciples stuck with him when others left for safer and greener pastures – I hope because if I didn't hope, to paraphrase John 6, "To whom would I go? He has the words of eternal life."

In my experience, the Christian story is a narrative of which I am a player, and the story is all about hope rescuing God's people from cynicism, despair, and fear. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Jeff Bouman is the Director of the Service-Learning Center at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI.

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."

Matthew 5:9

Peace. We hear the word a lot around Christmas. We talk about the Prince of Peace and we pronounce a blessing of peace on earth. But what is peacemaking? John Calvin explains that peacemakers "labor to settle differences among others, who advise all men to live at peace and take away every occasion of hatred and strife." The Hebrew term for peace, shalom, is more than the absence of violence. It is the righting of relationships. If you reconcile with your children, or make nice with your neighbor, have you become God's peacemaker? You're off to a good start, but we can do better, right? The call goes beyond ourselves. We are to dismantle racism, sexism, and all manners of hate-fueled injustice.

My own awakening to a broader understanding of peacemaking started in 2009, while touring the city of Hebron in Israel. I was introduced to Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), who were serving as non-violent accompaniment for Palestinian children getting beat up or harassed on their way to school by Israeli settlers. In Colombia they protect farmers from paramilitary groups. They guard Kurdish civilians from warlords in Iraq. In Canada, they stand between First-Nations' people and corporations who want their land. CPT's bravery humbled me and their humility moved me. But these people weren't just born brave--God moved individuals and churches into action. How? In 1984, Ron Sider shocked the Mennonite World Council in Strausburg, France by issuing a challenge to churches for whom peace is at the core of their identity.

"...Mahatma Gandhi once said that if the only two choices are to kill or to stand quietly by doing nothing while the weak are oppressed and killed, then, of course, we must kill. I agree.

But there is always a third option. We can always prayerfully and nonviolently place ourselves between the weak and the oppressor. Do we have the courage to move from the back lines of isolationist pacifism to the front lines of nonviolent peacemaking?"

–Ronald J. Sider

Sider's challenge was the impetus for the birth of CPT, whose slogan for years was "Getting In The Way." What would our Reformed response be? If we are to "take away every occasion for hate and strife," as Calvin suggests, if we are to become peacemakers, as Jesus commands, then how do we move to the front lines of nonviolent peacemaking?

Here's the rub. If we want to be peacemakers, we have to be bold in challenging the way things are but shouldn't be. We can't just buy fair trade coffee if we aren't willing to seriously discuss just agricultural reform. We can't just buy local, grass-fed meat and not advocate for humaneness for animals in all farms. We can't pretend that relocating a refugee family absolves us from looking at immigration reform. We can't love Israelis without loving Palestinians. We have to be willing to rattle the cages of conformism. Being on the front lines means closing the back doors that make it easy for us to get out of doing the hard stuff. It means adopting a lifestyle of change. This advent season, I pray for courage to become a peacemaker the way Jesus was a peacemaker.

"Jesus disturbed the status quo – but not for mere love of change. It was his commitment to shalom, to the right relationships promised in messianic prophecy, that make him a disturber of an unjust peace. He brought right relationships between men and women, between rich and poor by his radical challenge to the status quo." –Ronald J. Sider

May we all "be called Children of God."

Pray:

- *For the courage to challenge unjust peace for the sake of reconciling ourselves and all things to God.*
- *For individuals who would lead the church in that direction.*
- *For collective will to follow Jesus' calling.*

Mariano Avila is the program manager of *Hope Equals*, a project of CRWM to connect North American students to Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John 1:14

On the TV in the school cafeteria, a war-like scene was playing out before my eyes: helicopters swirled overhead as hundreds of men in shackles were herded onto buses; uniformed federal agents with guns stood staunchly by, watching. Hysterical, weeping women and children were interviewed by reporters, pleading for their fathers and husbands. I watched in confusion and horror. I had no idea what was going on.

But I quickly learned. My hometown in Iowa is next to the little hamlet of Postville, an agricultural community home to a large kosher meatpacking plant. The plant had employed hundreds of immigrant workers with fraudulent documents, and in May 2008, my senior year of high school, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) swept in. The raid resulted in the detainment and deportation of hundreds of workers, mostly from Central America, and left their family members behind with no means of support. Postville, reeling, fumbled its way into action, with local churches providing food and support as the shocked community figured out what to do next. Some of the workers had not even known their papers were fake; these labor abuses were just the start of a long train of violations which would be revealed at the plant. The truth slowly emerged in the wake of the raid, and Postville eventually settled into a new rhythm. But the signs of loss were evident in boarded-up houses, closed restaurants, and empty streets – and even more in declining attendance at school, fatherless children, and lonely wives. Families I knew personally were suddenly torn apart, and I felt helpless in such a broken world. It was a dark time for the community – and for my faith.

A few months after the raid, I found myself in Postville with a handmade paper sign, standing in a crowd of thousands. Led by rabbis, pastors, nuns, and a group of Hispanic children whose fathers had been deported, we walked the quiet streets of this rural Iowa town. In front of the raided plant, we stopped and prayed, our voices swirling heavenward in a glorious mix of Hebrew, Spanish, and English under the bright summer sun. At the conclusion of the march, we smushed ourselves into a Catholic church which had become the headquarters of the relief efforts and worshipped together, buoyed by the promise that our loving, incarnate God knew our pain and would continue to provide. We opened the windows so our songs and prayers could be heard by the crowd outside, and worshipped together – sticky and sweaty, tearful and hopeful, close to God and each other – in the beams of afternoon light.

In the years since that hopeful, light-filled service, the movement for just and humane immigration reform has ebbed and flowed, alternatively swelling with hope and deflating with setbacks. These days, the issue has again risen to the forefront of national politics, buoyed by a diverse coalition of voices in the wake of the recent election. Again, we feel hope that stories like Postville's will soon cease. The promise of change and redeemed structures feels close, somehow.

Maybe that's because it's Advent, and I'm thinking about the incarnation again. How incredible that the incarnate God stood close enough to us to hear our stories, know our pain, and love us! That truth is astonishing – but it makes more sense to me now, after standing close enough to hear the stories of so many of God's people. Advent is the time I am especially reminded of that: that our Savior and King, the light of the world who will make all things right, humbled himself, put skin on, and moved into our world – and that He will come again. What a glorious, hope-filled promise.

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for coming here, so near to us. Thank you for loving all of us – your children from every nation. In the face of injustices in this world, may you continue to remind us of the hope you provide. You are the light of the world, O coming King, and in your light we are able to hope. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and set all things right. Amen.

Kelly Organ is a staff member at the CRC Office of Social Justice.

"...17 See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. 19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more..."

Isaiah 65:17-25

God has a vision for his people, a vision far greater than any of us can grasp. But we can certainly catch glimpses of it. The vision God gave Isaiah of the new heavens and the new earth visualizes hope bearing fruit. God points to things that once induced pain and turns them into sources of hope: The memories of past pain will be gone. The wails of the grieving will end. Infant mortality will be no more. And human life will not cease to flourish.

But the images that strike me in this passage come in verses 21-24. It is the images of people living in the homes they have built and enjoying the fruits of their labors. It is the images of children with hope and a future, and of a God who answers his people before the words have left their mouths.

Two years ago I spent two weeks in Bethlehem. While there, I slept in the home of a Palestinian Christian family, overlooking the fields where Christ's birth was first announced to shepherds. I ate meals with the family. I shared photos of my family with them. And I listened to their stories.

I also listened to their fears. I heard their fears about the barrier wall being built around their hometown, about their difficulty traveling through check points, about harassment by Israeli soldiers, and about the Israeli settlement being built on stolen, Palestinian lands nearby. All of these fears were grounded in the reality of their daily lives.

The reality is that the unemployment rate in Bethlehem is around 20%, and finding employment that will feed a family is difficult. So the father of the family that I lived with went to work every day laying tile in an Israeli settlement, the very settlement that stood across the shepherds' fields from their home. The irony of this, of a man having to feed his family on wages earned working for those threatening to steal their very home, was not lost on anyone.

But there is still a light shining in Bethlehem. There is light in hope.

In Bethlehem, I caught glimpses of the God who hears us. I traveled there with a group of young people. Two years later, two of them have already returned to Bethlehem to work and learn more. God continues to give me an even more profound vision of his face through the passion and faithfulness of these young people. In them, I have hope.

I have hope in spite of what I've seen and heard. I have hope in spite of what I've read in the news. I have hope that the family I stayed with will remain safely in their home. I have hope because I have caught glimpses of God at work. God is at work in our church and God is still at work in Bethlehem.

Pray:

- *For God's shalom—justice and peace—to reign in Bethlehem,*
- *For the safety of the dwindling Christian community in the holy land,*
- *For the North American church to catch the vision of how God wants us to serve his people in the Middle East,*
- *For the name of Christ to be glorified above all others.*

Shannon Jammal-Hollemans is a student at Calvin Theological Seminary and an intern in the Office of Social Justice.

"For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

1 Corinthians 13:12-13

The Colombian community of Mampuján is waiting for justice. After being displaced from their original town-site twelve years ago by a right-wing paramilitary group, forced to flee and start a new life with nothing but each other, signs of long awaited hope are starting to appear. Mampuján has received the first sentence in Colombia's history for individual and community reparations, and is waiting for the fulfillment of what is theirs by law and the right to live with dignity that belongs to every person. We have seen results of our *esperanza*, when half the community received individual reparations in August, and we have strength to continue. We share what we have with those who have not yet received and we comfort those without hope with the promise of what is yet to come, as we wait to hear a proposed date for the next round of reparations.

"Reparation requires messianic *hope*. To hope, then, is to hope for the reparation of the irreparable. It is to hope for the present. The hope is for now...It is not a question of hoping to escape time, but of hoping for new time, for a new day and a new birth." (*Weakness of God*, John D. Caputo, 251)

We know that the community can never go back to the way things were before displacement, but we hold out and work towards something even better with the promise of collective reparations, including a health clinic, a new school, potable water, productive agricultural projects, a museum and improved streets and housing. Mampuján is waiting to be lifted out of poverty, for its name to be cleared of associations with terror, for health, for education, for remembering moments of horror so horror does not return.

We are waiting, but we are not passive. We are waiting with hope and we are waiting with action. We have non-violently marched for our rights; we work to organize ourselves and act in unity. We are waiting for a promise, yet we live with promise. We are acting out the life we are waiting for, for what else can we do? The community is being dignified even if they are not yet living in dignity, forgiving those who have displaced Mampuján as they work to break the cycle of violence. We fall down, we fight, we are tired, but we walk forward with the promise of new life, as we celebrate the new life we are given at every moment. Baby turtles hatch in the backyard; we greet each other with a blessing.

"The kingdom of God is not a far-off place but the rhythm of God in time, the way God gives us each day, from day to day, the way God rules in each day, like a melody that God is playing. Let us listen to the beat." (*Weakness of God*, John D. Caputo, pg 163)

Mampuján echoes of advent – all of us are also waiting, waiting for the coming of promises, waiting for the coming of our hope, yet we already have hope, for without hope, we would not be waiting. We have seen glimpses of what it is like to live in the kingdom come, so we work to live in the kingdom today. Our job is to wait for what is to come, but to live as if it is here. Justice is so far away, yet it is as close as our next breath. We are waiting.

Prayer

Oh God, we like Mampuján are sometimes tired of waiting. It has been a long time and it has not been easy. Give us hope. Give us comfort. Give us eyes to see your kingdom, ears to hear it singing, and hands to help shape it into being as we wait for its coming.

Anna Vogt lives and works in the Afro-descendant community of Mampuján, located on Colombia's Caribbean coast as part of the Mennonite Central Committee's Seed program.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...

Isaiah 61:1-2a

Sometimes silence speaks. Sometimes silence kills.

I've been in this congregational justice mobilizing position for two years now and if I've learned anything, it is that silence plus lies (or the more congenial term "myths") equals oppression. We all know this simple equation is true but we are strangely drawn to it. While Martin Luther King sat in a jail in Birmingham, his elders sent him a letter telling him to be quiet and leave the segregation issue to the courts. When AIDS was becoming an epidemic in the 1980s, the stigma was on the victims; discussing how to change the situation was considered akin to condoning sin. Pick a modern issue of injustice and surely you will find groups who, in spite of having the power to be heard, remain silent-- maybe because of uncertainty, maybe to stay neutral, maybe to be a good listener, maybe for good or bad intentions. At any rate, where there is injustice, there is silence.

The scenario is as true on a small scale as it is on a large scale. Consider the family with an abusive parent. The child is scolded, "What happens in our house is nobody else's business." The spouse defends the abuser to critics, "Well, if our son watched his behavior he wouldn't have these problems." The critics say, "Oh, I guess it's more complicated than I thought." The abuse continues. The child waits for someone to ride in and speak the truth. The victims of AIDS, preventable famine, changing climate, racism, and needless deportations wait with him.

Soon, we will celebrate Jesus' birth into a land of silence and lies. The threat of his voice moved Herod to put an early ransom on his head. This is the brave voice our world needs. Jesus doesn't fall into the temptation of silence like we do. The spirit of the Lord is on him. He sees through the myths. He is anointed to proclaim good news to the poor.

Of course, Jesus himself was silent from time to time. The most notable occasion, shortly after sharing the last supper bread and wine with his disciples, was remaining speechless before Herod. It was the death of him. A temporary death that resulted in new life.

This would become Jesus' gift to us. Light shed on a dark scene. If we are victims, he stands with us. If we need certainty mixed with courage to break from the ranks of neutrality, he offers it through the Holy Spirit, his word, and the communion of saints. He is the prince who replaces injustice with peace.

Prayer

In the words of Psalm 72, we pray that you would deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted ones who have no help. Take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. Rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in your sight.

Kris Van Engen is ordained in the Reformed Church of America and works as Congregational Justice Mobilizer for the CRC Office of Social Justice and World Renew.

"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

Romans 12:19

The birth of our Savior initiated the dawn of a new era secured in Christ's death and resurrection. Humankind had hopelessly buried itself in the darkness of a downward spiral of retribution. We sinned against God and others to the point of no return on the road to perdition. No amount of good works on our part could have paid the price incurred.

Then came the cross.

God, in His infinite mercy and grace, determined that He would accept the suffering and death of Christ as the payment for sin. The debt has been cancelled. No payback!

We have gratefully received this as individuals, but doesn't it have significance in how we view the punishment of wrongdoers in society? Scripture teaches that if there is hell to pay, that is God's business. We, however, ought never to deal with others according to the old order of payback.

Our criminal justice system is thoroughly retributive. We seek revenge against and payback from those who have committed crimes. Blockbuster Hollywood movies thrive on revenge. Bloodthirsty audiences cheer as the bad guys get theirs. Society is bound and determined to even the score. Retribution theology still holds sway.

But it's Christmas! God in Christ has reset the moral order. The price has been paid. No more payback! No more revenge. That puts punishment in an entirely different light. Just like with our children, punishment is not about payback for past misdeeds, but about correction and reform for the future.

Christ's death put an end to retribution and opened the door for restoration. Without Christ, the endless downward spiral of payback could never be set right. But the gift of Christmas has paid the price — forever.

Let's get the Good News out there. The power of the Holy Spirit can transform sinful hearts and sinful systems.

Think about it. It's a new day! Merry Christmas!

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for resetting the moral order. We could never pay back what we owe for violating you and others. We praise you this Christmas for coming to pay the price for sin, empowering us by your Spirit to live with you and our neighbors in a new order free from vengeance. Amen

Dr. H. David Schuringa is a minister in the Christian Reformed Church and president of Crossroad Bible Institute.