

'THOSE WHO ARE BOWED DOWN' JUSTICE FOR THE OPPRESSED

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, YEAR A

Lectionary Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10 Psalm 146:5-10 Luke 1:47-55 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11

Focus Text: Psalm 146:5-10

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, ⁶ who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers; [the LORD] upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked [the LORD] brings to ruin. ¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High. When my enemies turned back, they stumbled and perished before you. For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment. You have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name forever and ever. The enemies have vanished in everlasting ruins; their cities you have rooted out; the very memory of them has perished. But the LORD sits enthroned forever, [the LORD] has established [the LORD's] throne for judgment. [The LORD] judges the world with righteousness; [the LORD] judges the peoples with equity. The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you. Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion. Declare [the LORD's] deeds among the peoples. For [the One] who avenges blood is mindful of them; [the LORD] does not forget the cry of the afflicted. Be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death, so that I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance. The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught. The LORD has made [the LORD's self] known, [the LORD] has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever. Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human.

Psalm 9:1-20

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; [the LORD] has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Isaiah 61:1-3

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love [God]? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

James 2:1-9

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY CHRIS LIU BEERS, PROGRAM ASSOCIATE
NC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Psalm 146 contains elements of Hebrew wisdom literature – a tradition that includes works such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and some other Psalms. This kind of literature is characterized in part by teachings about the nature of trustworthiness (see, for example, a famous passage in Proverbs 3:5).

Whom, in other words, should Israel trust?

In response to this underlying question, Psalm 146 admonishes its readers not to trust in “princes,” who “cannot save,” but rather to hope in “the God of Jacob.” What follows is a litany of the salvific works of the LORD: creating (v. 6a), sustaining (v. 6b), liberating (v. 7a), redeeming (v. 7b), healing (v. 8). The God of Jacob, proclaims the psalmist, has steadfastly wrought justice for the oppressed, the marginalized, the neglected, the forgotten and the poor. And this God will reign forever. The powers of this world, unjust as they may be, are fleeting.

This psalm describes – in terms at once both universal and deeply personal – the character of Israel’s God. What are the implications of such liturgy, of such public language used in worship? Clearly, for the psalmist, to place one’s hope in such a God is more than platitude or simply wishing that things would get better. Hope and trust in God involve here more than lip service to the Almighty, for to praise this God is to do the work of social justice. In other words, to feed the hungry *is* to worship. To open the eyes of the blind, lift up those who are bowed down is to join one’s voice, one’s life, with that of this ancient psalmist in praise of the God of Jacob. Commenting on this psalm, Walter Brueggemann observes that “Israel cannot praise Yahweh very long without embracing the core agenda of well-being for God’s beloved creatures. In this psalm Yahweh gives that which Jesus in Matthew 6 removes from our zone of anxiety: food, clothing, and wherewithal for life. This theme keeps emerging in the midst of Israel’s most passionate praise of Yahweh” (*The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p. 126-127).

The beautiful vision of the psalmist is based in part on Israel’s “salvation history,” the many ways in which God acted with and for God’s people. Yet, reading these ancient words as Christians, we cannot help but note that Jesus himself embodied the profound vision of Psalm 146. He gave food to the hungry, he opened the eyes of the blind, he lifted up those who were bowed down, he set the prisoner free, he embraced orphans, widows, and lepers, and indeed he thwarted the ways of the wicked. Christ came not to abolish or even update the moral vision of the Hebrew Bible; he came to *fulfill* it, to live it to the full. This particular psalm remembers in vivid language how the God of Israel – and Jesus the Messiah – have demonstrated abounding justice and love to all people through the centuries.

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY REV. LAURA SPANGLER, PASTOR, LLOYD
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, WINSTON-SALEM

The Psalmist speaks of the nature of God. Why are we to lift up those who are bowed down? Why do we seek justice for the oppressed and food for the hungry? We, the church, live justice, because this is the nature and business of God. One thousand years after the Psalms were written, Jesus came to show us more fully who God is. He lived and taught what his mother sang and taught him, the good news that God lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Mary, the one we remember giving birth this advent season echoes the teachings she has learned from the Psalms. Now these words of who God is become flesh and dwell among us. Jesus incarnates the prophecy and calls us to give flesh to God’s acts of lifting up those bowed down.

For 10 years I have served a very poor church. The church’s total income is way below the poverty level, especially for a family of 45. Many of the folks who worship with and have leadership at the church are homeless or unemployed. Many have black or brown skin. Monthly fellowship meals are really a feeding of the hungry as the majority of guests at every meal are without work. The church pays utilities for a day shelter for the homeless in its small basement. With only weekly offerings for income, somehow the church has no debt and a little surplus. It must be that God cares about the poor and still makes a way out of no way.

Many churches with much greater income are afraid of a hands-on ministry with the oppressed. Many of us wealthier Christians are deeply afraid of poverty, even if we have the privilege of white skin. God has a special love for the poor, but it hurts to be poor. Often the problems causing poverty are very complex.

Sam, with whom we hold hands and eat together at our weekly Bible study fellowship, is too weak to get a job because he just learned he is HIV+. Lolita came with her baby to Bible study and worship to ask the church if they would allow a prayer rally for farmworkers who have been denied minimum wage and are suffering from nicotine poisoning from harvesting tobacco. Racism plays a role in all this. Societal greed also hurts the poor.

Without hesitation, my bowed down church says yes to justice for the bowed down. Their hospitality is God driven and unending for 137 years. In my short time as pastor, we have hosted many a peace march, rally and prayer service because of the injustice of our war with Iraq. For 20 years Lloyd Presbyterian hosted rallies for a young man unjustly accused of murder and rape. Finally, Darryl Hunt was proven innocent and has lifted up the lowly little church that stood with him as the city sought his guilt. Before the trials of Darryl Hunt, this humble sanctuary was a center for civil rights for African Americans.

Why do churches seek justice for the oppressed? Because God does and we are the people of God who are to live with Christ as our guide and role model, even to the ridicule of society.

Advent comes to us in winter. It is cold and people without homes and heat can literally freeze on the sidewalk. What joy it was to see that one of our large downtown Baptist churches just decided to allow their new gym to be a night shelter for the homeless until Spring comes. No individual can do this. It will take a community and good organization to staff this shelter. God's people are lifting up the bowed down until they have the strength to stand and face forward. Jesus, the child of advent, must have taken this psalm to heart as his mother read it to him. When he became a man, he healed a woman whose spine actually caused her to bend over.

There are many pressures that can make us all bend like a tree limb covered with ice. An affluent, safe and clean church can be bent over with a meaningless ministry when it fails to hear and respond to the cry of the poor.

Jesus learned about his mission in Isaiah, the Psalms, through his parents and study in the synagogue. We are called to live into the mind and ways of Christ. A ministry without justice for the oppressed is a bent over, weak and hobbling ministry. The good news of Advent is that our savior Christ is coming, through the church, to liberate us all.

WORSHIP AID - 'THOSE WHO ARE BOWED DOWN'

RESPONSIVE READING

Generous Lord, show us how to see the world around us through the eyes of the prophets, that we would be transformed by your truth.

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Isaiah said, "Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance, for truth stumbles in the public square." (*Isaiah 59:14*)

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Jeremiah said, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages." (*Jeremiah 22:13*)

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Amos said, "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land saying, ... we will practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweeping of the wheat." (*Amos 8:4-6*)

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Malachi said, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." (*Malachi 3:1*)

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Mary said, "... The Lord has shown strength with his arm, and scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." (*Luke 1:51*)

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he said, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (*Luke 4:18-19, 21*)

In Your mercy, forgive us. In Your grace, help us to hear Your word.

In our hearing, may God's word be fulfilled.

(adapted from "Faith, Economic Justice and Free Trade," www.share-elsalvador.org/cafta/faith_eco.htm)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

We walk day by day along a Jericho road where we encounter many who have been beaten down by the violence of our times and abandoned for dead. Let us confess the times when we have walked by on the other side. Let us repent of our failures to love our neighbor as ourselves. (*Silence*).

For our incapacity to feel the sufferings of others, and for our tendency to live comfortably with injustice,
God forgive us.

For the self-righteousness that denies guilt, and the self-interest that strangles compassion,
God forgive us.

For those who live their lives in careless unconcern, who cry "Peace, peace" when there is no peace,
We ask your mercy.

For our failings in community, our lack of understanding,
We ask your mercy.

For our lack of forgiveness, openness, sensitivity,
God forgive us.

For the times we are too eager to be better than others, when we are too rushed to care, when we are too tired to bother, when we don't really listen, when we are too quick to act from motives other than love,
God forgive us. Lead us in the path of righteousness, justice and peace. Free us for joyful obedience we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(adapted from "Ecumenical Peace Service: 'And None Shall Be Afraid,'"

www.kairosCanada.org/e/resources/worship/None_Shall_Be_Afraid%20ecumenical%20service.pdf)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

✠ <i>The Church of Christ in Every Age</i>	CH 475/NCH 306/MW 694/ TH 6525/PH 421/BH 402/UMH 589
✠ <i>What Does the Lord Require?</i>	UMH 441/PH 405/CH 661/MW 695/ TH 605
✠ <i>Hail to the Lord's Anointed</i>	AM 107/LW 82/TH 616/MW 263/ CH 140/NCH 104/UMH 203
✠ <i>Behold a Broken World</i>	UMH 426/MW 691
✠ <i>In the Breaking of the Bread (Cuando Partimos)</i>	GC 841
✠ <i>God of Grace and God of Glory</i>	MW 751/AM 62/CH 464/NCH 436/ UMH 577/TH 594

♦ Hymnal Legend ♦

† AM	— African Methodist Episcopal
† BH	— Baptist Hymnal
† CH	— Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
† CM	— Christian Methodist Episcopal
† GC	— Gather Comprehensive (Rom Cath)
† LW	— Lutheran Worship
† MW	— Moravian Book of Worship
† NCH	— New Century Hymnal (UCC)
† PH	— Presbyterian Hymnal
† TH	— The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
† UMH	— United Methodist Hymnal

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

A Prayer of Jubilee: Dreaming Anew

In the day of Jubilee, the Holy One brings justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry.

In the day of Jubilee, the Holy One sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind.

In the day of Jubilee, the Holy One lifts up those who are bowed down and watches over strangers and widows and orphans.

In the day of Jubilee, all creation reaps a rich harvest of peace.

Today is the day of Jubilee, for the Holy One has come.

We give you thanks, O God, for your work among us. Transform us by your grace into a Jubilee people dedicated to the work of justice and peace. Amen.

(adapted from Seekers' Church, "Jubilee 2006: Dreaming Anew," www.seekerschurch.org/liturgies/current.htm)

An Advent Prayer for Justice

In this season of Advent, we eagerly await the coming of the Lord.

Behold the Lord, God's Servant – the Chosen One.

God's Spirit rests upon the Son to bring justice to the nations.

We need justice in our homes and communities today.

Come, Lord Jesus, with justice for the earth.

We need justice in our schools and on our streets today.

We need justice in our nation and world today.

Come, Lord Jesus, with justice for the earth.

Lord, God's Servant, the Chosen One,

We call upon you to uproot ungodliness

In every crevice of human existence today.

Come, Lord Jesus, with justice for the earth.

We call upon you Lord, the only Righteous Judge,

To dispense the type of justice that transforms illicit behavior.

Come, Lord Jesus, with justice for the earth.

We call upon you, Lord, to provide the kind of justice

That clears the muddy waters of corruption and lifts up those who are bowed down.

Come, Lord Jesus, with justice for the earth.

The earth cries with the voices of the hungry,

The maimed and the slaughtered innocents.

Come, Lord Jesus, with justice for the earth.

As it is in heaven, may it be in our midst.

For Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

(adapted from "21st Century Africana Worship Resources," www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=13171&loc_id=1040,1041,1061,1079)

The Winter Journey of Advent

In this time of darkness,

We choose to look toward the Light.

In this time when so many suffer,

We choose faith, not despair:

We choose the work of compassionate justice.

As we move through Advent together,

Hungry for transformation, for hope,

Our steps themselves

Transform us, nourish us.

We are on constant pilgrimage,

Moving to the heart of things,

Reaching beyond what any one of us

Can reach alone.

May the brightness of the Incarnation

Guide us as we continue,

With the promise of the Prince of Peace

As the bright star in these dark nights.

(adapted from "Education for Justice," www.educationforjustice.org)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

▣ QUOTES ▣

Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.

Simone Weil

He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.

Thomas Paine

No other offense has ever been visited with such severe penalties as seeking to help the oppressed.

Clarence Darrow

▪ **PERSONAL VIGNETTE** ▪

ON THE LINE: STORIES OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP IN NORTH CAROLINA
COLLECTED BY THE 2007 UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA DOCUMENTARY PHOTOJOURNALISM CLASS

Even in the world's most powerful economy, families are not immune from day to day financial struggle. Since the Census began tracking poverty rates in 1970, the national rate has never dropped below 11 percent. Today, 37 million Americans, or 12.6 percent, live under the poverty line. Many more fight to stay just above it. For some, financial woe is temporary – for others it is a lifelong battle. It begs the question, is poverty an inevitable condition in our modern global economy or can we do better?

For many North Carolinians, economic hardship is a way of life. Even in times of “healthy” economic growth, not all paths lead to financial comfort and stability. Jobs are lost. Marriages dissolve. Medical benefits dry up. Today, more than half a million people in North Carolina live below the poverty threshold. Changes in the labor market, characterized by massive layoffs in the furniture, textile and tobacco industries, have led to painful transitions for NC workers who once lived comfortably. Alternative manufacturing jobs have been scarce, especially in rural areas where a handful of factories accounted for most employment. For these blue collar families, chance events have a way of compounding economic hardship – making the pursuit of the American Dream a seemingly unavailing cause.

Here, one North Carolina couple briefly tells their story: “I just wish the stress would go away. I’ve got so much stress in my life – from every direction... I’m Greg, and I’m 51 years old. It’s a big change going from making \$70,000 a year to nothing. We’re below the poverty level now...

“I’m Christine, and I get a disability check once a month – it’s supposed to last us? We’re really squeezed tight. All of a sudden they came up out of the blue and told us that we’ve got to move by May 1, which is about 45 days.

“My next fear is that I’ll be out on the street, holding up a little sign that says ‘Will work for food.’ Or be homeless, you know, and wondering where the next meal’s gonna come from. My life was good at one time. But now, I’m nobody. I’m nothin’. My self esteem has gone so far downhill. I don’t know what’s going to happen to us.

“Right now I can’t look for a job because I’ve had shoulder surgery. As far as doing anything, it’s kind of boring, cause I don’t really have anything to do. I hope I can at least get back on my feet, at least to where I can at least pay my own way... I’m worried, confused, and hurt. I’m anxious. I’m a little nervous. It kept me up last night, thinking about what is going on...

“Starting over – it’s hard, it’s frustrating, it works on your nerves. We’re down right now, and the chips seem like they’ve landed in a scattered pile, but one thing we have in our favor, which doesn’t sound like a whole lot, is that we’re best friends and best friends see each other through the worst.”

(adapted from “On the Line,” www.carolinaphotojournalism.org/ontheline)

▪ **CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES** ▪

- ✦ www.nccouncilofchurches.org/resources/downloads/ThyKingdomCome.pdf – The North Carolina Council of Churches has developed this comprehensive small-group study guide, entitled “Thy Kingdom Come: A Call to Prophetic Ministry,” in order to address a number of social justice issues from a biblical and theological perspective. At nearly 70 pages, this resources addresses such relevant topics as housing, health-care, wages, racism, criminal justice, education, sustainable communities and more in a manner conducive to group discussion and conversation.
- ✦ www.ncjustice.org – North Carolina Justice Center is the state’s leading private, nonprofit anti-poverty organization. Its mission is to reduce and eliminate poverty in North Carolina by helping to ensure that every North Carolina household gains access to the resources, services, and fair treatment that it needs in order to enjoy economic security.
- ✦ www.ncpeacejustice.org – North Carolina Peace & Justice Coalition is a broad coalition of various organizations devoted to fighting injustice in its many forms across the state of North Carolina.

- ✦ www.common-sense.org – *The Common Sense Foundation*. Founded in 1994, the Common Sense Foundation is named for the most famous work of Thomas Paine, one of America's earliest progressives. Like Paine, Common Sense is guided by a belief in equality and justice for all people regardless of race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or economic status.
- ✦ www.legalaidnc.org – *Legal Aid of North Carolina*, a statewide, nonprofit, 501(c)3 law firm that provides free legal services in civil matters to low-income people in order to ensure equal access to justice and to remove legal barriers to economic opportunity.
- ✦ www.acorn.org – *ACORN*, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is the nation's largest community organization of low- and moderate-income families, working together for social justice and stronger communities. Since 1970, ACORN has grown to more than 220,000 member families, organized in 850 neighborhood chapters in over 100 cities across the U.S. and in cities in Canada, the Dominican Republic, and Peru. ACORN's accomplishments include successful campaigns for better housing, schools, neighborhood safety, health care, job conditions, and more. ACORN members participate in local meetings and actively work on campaigns, elect leadership from the neighborhood level up, and pay the organization's core expenses through membership dues and grassroots fundraisers. ACORN has constantly challenged the traditional notions of what a community organization is, and its family of organizations includes two radio stations, a voter registration network, a housing corporation, and several publications.
- ✦ www.usccb.org/cchd/advent3.pdf – From the *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops* and the *Catholic Campaign for Human Development*, this four-week resource is a seasonal aid for prayer and reflection about the social justice message of Advent (particularly through Luke's Gospel, although similar themes are present in Matthew as well). It focuses on four pillars of the Advent season: Truth, Justice, Love and Freedom.
- ✦ www.bread.org/get-involved/at-church/Advent-Resources.html – Sponsored by *Bread for the World*, this webpage features a collection of ecumenical, Advent-themed worship resources centered on social justice in general and on feeding the hungry in particular. Litanies, prayers, fact sheets, and denominational resources are available.
- ✦ www.buynothingchristmas.org – *Buy Nothing Christmas* is an initiative started by Canadian Mennonites who offer a prophetic “no” to the patterns of over-consumption of middle-class North Americans. They invite Christians (and others) all over North America to join a movement to de-commercialize Christmas and re-design a Christian lifestyle that is richer in meaning, smaller in impact upon the earth, and greater in giving to people less-privileged.
- ✦ www.simpleliving.org – *Alternatives* is a non-profit organization that equips people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly, and celebrate responsibly. Founded in 1973 as a protest against the commercialization of Christmas, its focus is on encouraging celebrations that reflect conscientious ways of living. Its mission is to challenge the way our consumer society continues to usurp our holy days and to exploit people and the environment.

KEY FACTS

- ❑ Wealth is distributed very unevenly across North Carolina's citizens: North Carolina has one of the largest gaps in the nation between the state's wealthiest and poorest families. In the early 2000s, the richest 20 percent of families had an average income (\$110,180) that was 7.4 times greater than the average income of the poorest 20 percent of families (\$14,884). This is up from a ratio of 5.3 in the early 1980s. North Carolina's rate of growth in income inequality over that period was the nation's 12th largest.¹
- ❑ In North Carolina, almost 9,000 households go without heat in the winter; and more than 13,000 homes still lack indoor plumbing.²
- ❑ Almost 1.5 million North Carolinians lack any kind of health insurance—about one sixth of the population. Of these, more than 75 percent either work full-time or live in households with a full-time worker.³
- ❑ According to the 2006 United Nations' "Human Development Report," almost 2 million children die every year "for want of a glass of clean water and adequate sanitation." Globally, 1.2 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.6 billion lack access to adequate sanitation.⁴
- ❑ According to the U.N. Development Programme, basic nutrition and health care needs could be met around the world for an additional \$13 billion each year. Each year, Americans and Europeans spend \$17 billion on pet food.⁵

The Bible and Social Justice: A United Methodist Perspective⁶

Jim Wallis of the *Sojourners* Community tells the following story to point out how significant justice and peace issues are to the biblical message as a whole. He and a friend took a scissors and an old King James Bible, and cut out every verse that had anything to do with peace or justice issues. When they got through, they had very little left of the Bible. They would pull the Bible out at workshops, wave it aloft, and make the point vividly that without the strands of justice one could virtually not even read the Bible. (Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*, pp.149-151.)

The point is a sound one. If we are to take the Bible seriously, we cannot ignore the fact that justice is at the heart of its message. The Judeo-Christian covenant presents an alternative world view to all other authoritative claims. And it is a world view seen from a unique perspective, the viewpoint of the suffering and the powerless. Key scriptures talk about the poor crying out and God hearing their cry (Deuteronomy 26:7), and about our faith identity being that of homeless wanderers ("My Father was a wandering Aramean," Deuteronomy 26:5-10). Even Mary's famous Magnificat, when Mary gives thanks for being chosen to bear the world's savior, speaks of hope based on the reversal of fortune between the haves and have-nots (Luke 1:46-55), as does the similar "Song of Hannah" in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. As noted above, the covenant is one of righteous relationship. As this righteousness is worked out and recorded through the words and acts of God and of the chosen people in daily living, it is often understood in terms of justice – just (or "right-wised") acts, and just relationships. Justice, then, is central to faithful living. The prophet Micah records it best in summing up the entire covenant with one three-part sentence: "What does God require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

While the primary relationship in focus is the relationship between God and God's people, that is not the only one. There is a triangle of relationships which includes not only God and the people, but also the rest of creation. In addition to the relationship between the people and God, there is a relationship between the people and God's creation. This, too, must be a "righteous" relationship, one based on mutuality, respect and justice. Thus, despite long held views of exploitation to the contrary (based in part on the exhortation to "have dominion" over the earth in Genesis 1:26,28), we are to exercise justice in our relationship to the land (see Psalm 37:1-29 or Jeremiah 7:1-15.)

There is one other crucial relationship in the triangle, and that is the one between people and people. This, too, must be a "righteous" relationship of mutual respect and justice. Since the covenant is made between God and the corporate body of all the people, and since all people are equally children of God, relationships must be based on equality. Faithful following of the corporate covenant inherently includes justice, prosperity, hospitality, and *shalom*, not just for some but for all.

Reflections for Advent: A Catholic Perspective⁷

During this season of Advent, we prepare for and celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. More clearly than anyone who walked the earth, Jesus showed us the way to God's peace, which surpasses all human understanding. Clearly, all that we know of his life and mission indicates that Jesus embodied truth, justice, love, and freedom. How we long for lasting peace during this season of Advent and always! Forty years ago, in his encyclical *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*, Pope John XXIII reflected on the four essential conditions of the human spirit that are needed to sustain universal peace and expounded on the moral nature of human society: "Grounded as it is in truth, it must function according to the norms of justice, it should be inspired and perfected by mutual love, and finally it should be brought to an ever more refined and human balance in freedom."

In his 2003 World Day of Peace Message, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed that these four "pillars of peace" are as valid today as they were in 1963. He explained how these conditions of peace converge toward a central moral understanding of individual and community rights and responsibilities in society: "Truth will build peace if every individual sincerely acknowledges not only his [or her] rights, but also his [or her] own duties towards others. Justice will build peace if in practice everyone respects the rights of others and actually fulfills his [or her] duties towards them. Love will build peace if people feel the needs of others as their own and share what they have with others, especially the values of mind and spirit which they possess. Freedom will build peace and make it thrive if, in the choice of the means to that end, people act according to reason and assume responsibility for their own actions."

In striving for peace in the third millennium, we can look to the example of others who helped to increase peace in their communities by following Jesus' way of respecting the rights of others while fulfilling one's own responsibilities. As we prepare in Advent to celebrate Christ's coming to establish peace on earth, these guideposts identified by our Holy Fathers – John XXIII and John Paul II – mark our spiritual walk. What are our rights and our duties? What are the rights of others and our duties towards them? How might we be challenged to respect those rights and fulfill those duties? In what ways do truth, justice, love, and freedom build peace in our lives and communities today?

When do human needs seem overwhelming to you? How could you act with, rather than for, poor and low-income persons in your community? What deeper loving actions could you take with others to "share one of your cloaks" with persons who have none and thereby increase peace in your community?

1. North Carolina Justice Center, "The Rich and the Rest: Income Inequality Accelerates in NC," www.ncjustice.org/headlines/details.php?id=614.
2. North Carolina Housing Coalition, "Housing Facts and Statistics in NC," www.nchousing.org/research_publications/facts_stats/index.html.
3. North Carolina Institute of Medicine, "Covering the Uninsured," www.nciom.org/projects/uninsured/overview.pdf.
4. United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report 2006," <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006>.
5. Norman Myers, "The Environment in the Century Ahead," *United Nations University*, www.unu.edu/millennium/myers.html.
6. United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, "The Bible and Social Justice: A Brief Introduction," www.umc-gbcs.org/att/cf/%7B325AB72F-313E-4CC3-BB1A-EF0A52968A8D%7D/The_Bible_and_Social_Justice.pdf.
7. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, "Advent 2003," www.usccb.org/cchd/advent3.pdf.