

'GOD HAS LIFTED UP THE LOWLY' JUSTICE FOR THE DOWNTRODDEN

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT, YEAR C

EDITOR'S NOTE: This opening section of "Acts of Faith, Year C" is intended as an introduction to many of the justice-oriented themes of the Council's work. Upcoming topics will address, in detail, such issues as poverty, healthcare, discrimination, reconciliation, peacemaking, housing, materialism, hunger, and environmental justice. Please consider the "downtrodden" in your own community—how might these worship resources encourage your congregation to work for justice on their behalf?

Lectionary Texts: Micah 5:2-5a Psalm 80:1-7 Luke 1:47-55 Hebrews 10:5-10

Focus Text: Luke 1:47-55

⁴⁷And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for [God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of [God's] servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is [God's] name. ⁵⁰[God's] mercy is for those who fear [God] from generation to generation. ⁵¹[God] has shown strength with [God's] arm; [God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³[God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴[God] has helped [God's] servant Israel, in remembrance of [God's] mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise [God] made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; [God] alone you shall worship; to [God] you shall hold fast, and by [God's] name you shall swear.

Deuteronomy 10:17-20

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

Psalms 146:5-10

As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. [God] does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number. [God] gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields; [God] sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. [God] frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. [God] takes the wise in their own craftiness; and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope at noonday as in the night. But [God] saves the needy from the sword of their mouth, from the hand of the mighty. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth.

Job 5:8-16

But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the market-places.

Luke 11:42-43

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY REV. JILL EDENS
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CHAPEL HILL (UCC)

Frederick Danker observes in his commentary on Luke (Jesus and the New Age, Frederick W. Danker, Fortress Press, 1988), that deities have been viewed as arbiters of justice and deliverers of the oppressed since ancient times. No people were more acquainted with the dynamics of reversal than were the Greeks, who gave the theme its loftiest expression in the Homeric epics and the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides.

The poet Archilochos expressed a consensus:

The deities are ever just. Full oft they raise
those who lie prostrate on the darkened earth.

Full oft the prosperous are tripped, their bellies
to the sky; and miseries untold attend them.
Mindless in aimless poverty they wander.

When asked what God was doing, Chilon, the Lacedaemonian poet, replied: "humbling the lofty and exalting the humble" (Diogenes Laertius 1.69).

Mary recalls the words of her own ancient faith tradition. Mary's Magnificat is a literary quilt that stitches together various parts of the Hebrew scriptures, first expressing Mary's personal experience in vv. 46-50 and then praising the Savior of Israel in vv. 51-55. She echoes Hannah's words from 1 Sam. 1:11 where God remembers those who have been humiliated (in Hannah's case, by infertility) and she conceived and bore a son. The Magnificat also recalls Deut. 10:17-18 where God's will is executed as justice for the widow and orphan, as love for strangers, and provision of food and clothing for the destitute. God's mighty acts are also expressed in the rescue of the oppressed and the rejection of the wicked in Ps. 146.

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY REV. JILL EDENS

News of any pregnancy is an unsettling, life-changing event. Hold a newborn, and all of a sudden you experience cars and parking lots differently. As they grow the world seems edged with ledges and corners and sharp objects. In the unfolding of everyday life, we ourselves

know what it means to bear another in our bodies – to be overshadowed by a new life that will not only change our lives but for whom we would be willing to change the world.

To accept the angel's message, Mary had to embrace a deep displacement in life. "How can this be?" she asks. She wants to know whose idea this was and how it would happen. Now that God was ready to surrender to human flesh, would she agree to surrender too, carry God around in her body? What might happen to her? Would she be expelled from her father's house, abandoned by Joseph, become the focus of community derision? Would this mean exile as it had for Hagar and Ishmael? Israel already had a king after all, and we know that Jesus' arrival would later cause Mary and Joseph to flee into exile in the land of Egypt. Yet, with all her questions and giving her assent, Mary travels to share this good news with her cousin, Elizabeth, singing the Magnificat and foretelling a deep displacement in the world where the proud are scattered, the powerful put in their place, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent away with nothing.

One can hardly imagine a more intrusive demand from God than the one to which Mary responds, "Here am I, servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word." And, she cannot know how much intimacy with God will cost. This gospel confronts us and requires us to get close to a God who calls us to bear him in our bodies and with our lives. Elizabeth O'Connor writes of the risks involved in bearing witness to a world that prefers risk-free conversion. "What are the risks?" She asks:

For me they are all summed up in rejection – that most painful of all experiences. If I follow my path, I have friends who will learn that their hearts are not in communion with mine. We all seek out the company of those who think the way we think, and perceive the world the way we perceive it. It is when we find at-oneness with each other that we feel at home, accepted, companioned. . . I want to be in step with people I care about, to laugh with them, celebrate with them, agree with them. In all the world I want least to be a prophet.

Like the unwed mother, when we invite Christ into our lives, we cannot hide it from the world anymore than his mother could forever camouflage her swelling belly. Christ will reshape us, displacing our old lives for the new creation. O'Connor is right, our friends and loved ones will soon learn that we are not in step with them but are in the business of fomenting a great displacement where the first will be last, and the last will be first.

Luke knew this. Luke preached this sermon to a congregation of converts whom he knew would be isolated by this vision of ministry. And so he tells a story about what will happen when they, like Mary, become Theotokos, God bearers in the world. "See?" He seems to say. This is how it is when Jesus is born in you. Good pastor that he is, Luke worries about his flock. How can he prepare them for what will happen when they let Jesus in? When they join up with those who are smuggling God into the world in their bodies? There will be exile from friends and family who do not share this vision, and there will be rejection just as Elizabeth O'Connor describes it.

If this story is just a nice tale about Mary, then we are the most to be pitied, and the world is without hope because Mary has served her term and has gone on to her reward. But if this story is about you and me and what happens when Jesus starts to grow in us, then we wonder if these bodies are expansive enough to bear such a hope.

Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian, wrote, "We are all meant to be [Theotokos], mothers of God. What good is it to me," he said, "if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in us." (Meditations with Meister Eckhart, Matthew Fox, Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983, pp. 74, 81.)

You now bear the hope of the world in your bodies. You are the ones who will bear him into the future, old and young, fertile and barren. In the unlikeliest of containers God has seeded hope for the lowly, justice for the down-trodden, and new life for the sinner. Why? Because with God, nothing is impossible.

WORSHIP AID – 'GOD HAS LIFTED UP THE LOWLY'

RESPONSIVE READING

For all those who have fallen victim to hatred and inhumanity, for those loved ones who are left behind to mourn, for the souls of those whose hearts are cold,
Lord, hear our prayer.

For the children who are being born into this world of conflict and violence, for women and mothers who suffer needlessly,
Lord, hear our prayer.

For all those who have been forced into unemployment, who long to return to work, for all those who struggle to support their families,
Lord, hear our prayer.

For the policy-makers who are misguided in thinking that bombs and bullets will bring about peace, and for those who feel called to conscientiously object to military orders,
Lord, hear our prayer.

For the children who cry in their beds at night and wonder 'what have I done?', for the mothers and fathers who must try to explain the inexplicable,
Lord, hear our prayer.

For all the children who have died before their time, for the healers who are denied the opportunity to use their gifts,
Lord, hear our prayer.

For the redemption of souls of both victim and perpetrator, for those who commit themselves to the forgiveness of sins,
Lord, hear our prayer.

ALL: O God,
 Open our eyes that we may see the needs of others;
 Open our ears that we may hear their cries;
 Open our hearts that we may feel their anguish and their joy.
 Let us defend the oppressed, the poor, the powerless, without fear of the anger and might of the powerful.
 Show us where love and hope and faith are needed, and use us to bring them to those places. Open our ears
 and eyes, our hearts and lives, that we may in these coming days be able to do the work of justice and peace
 for you.
 Amen.

(adapted from "A Call to Prayer in Two Voices," Sabeel Center, www.sabeel.org/old/conf2001/worship1.htm)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Hold us before you in judgment as well as grace, O God, until we are willing to serve instead of being served; until we are more concerned for justice than our comfort; until we walk the second mile and turn the other cheek; until we make right our wronged relationships. We confess how we run from the demands of the Gospel while expecting our demands to be met. Forgive, O God, our cowardice in the face of injustice, our posturing on the issues instead of acting in faith, our endorsement of pettiness and false patriotism. Please forgive us for all that is past and renew our discipleship that we may serve you in these dark and perilous days.

(by Rev. Eugene Walker, from the National Council of Churches, www.nccusa.org/iraq/prayersforpeace.html)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- ✓ We Are Often Tossed & Driven AM 394/UMH 525/NCH 444/CM 325
- ✓ I Will Lift Up My Eyes GA 500
- ✓ What Does the Lord Require MW 695/CH 659/PH 405/TH 605/UMH 441
- ✓ Canto de Esperanza (Song of Hope) PH 432

w Hymnal Legend w	
†	UMH – United Methodist Hymnal
†	PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
†	GA—Gather Hymnal (Roman Catholic)
†	TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
†	MW – Moravian Book of Worship
†	AM – African Methodist Episcopal
†	CM – Christian Methodist Episcopal
†	CH—Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
†	NCH—New Century Hymnal (UCC)

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

A New Vision

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of our land as your love would make it;
 - a land where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;
 - a land where the benefits of civilized life are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;
 - a land where different races and cultures live in tolerance and mutual respect;
 - a land where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.
 And give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.

(from the Anglican Church, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/carey/releases/011002c.htm)

Prayer for Social Justice

Almighty and eternal God, may your grace
 kindle in all persons a love
 of the many unfortunate people
 whom poverty and misery reduce
 to a condition of life unworthy of human beings.

Arouse in the hearts
 of those who call you God
 a hunger and thirst for social justice
 and for fraternal charity in deeds and in truth.
 Grant, O Lord, peace in our days,
 peace to our souls, peace to our community.

Amen.

(Pope Pius XII, from the Center of Concern, www.coc.org/focus/ej/prayers/justice_piusXII.html)

Justice Prayer

O God, we pray for all those in our world who are suffering from injustice:

For those who are discriminated against because of their race, color or religion; for those imprisoned for working for the relief of oppression; for those who are hounded for speaking the inconvenient truth; for those tempted to violence as a cry against overwhelming hardship; for those deprived of reasonable health and education; for those suffering from hunger and famine; for those too weak to help themselves and who have no one else to help them; for the unemployed who cry out for work but do not find it. We pray for anyone of our acquaintance who is personally affected by injustice. Forgive us, Lord, if we unwittingly share in the conditions or in a system that perpetuates injustice. Show us how we can serve your children and make your love practical by washing their feet.

Amen.

(Mother Teresa, from the Center of Concern, www.coc.org/focus/ej/prayers/justice_motherteresa.html)

ADVENT MATERIALS

ADVENT HYMNS

- ✓ Comfort, Comfort You My People NCH 101/MW 264/CH 122/LW 28/TH 67/
PH 3/GA 326
- ✓ The Clouds of Judgment Gather LW 463

RESPONSIVE READINGS

An Advent Prayer of Confession and Dedication

O God, in the fullness of time you sent your son Jesus in a manner that confounded kings yet moved shepherds and magi. Guide us now as we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace.

As we make our family plans for Advent and Christmas,

We commit to hold central the one whose birth we celebrate.

As we feel the pressure to buy and buy and buy,

We commit to resist our temptations to find you in material things.

As we consider all of the waste generated in our celebrations,

We commit to set limits on what we will consume and throw away.

As our plans do not include those who are hungry, sick, lonely and imprisoned,

We commit to seek you in the spirit of humility.

As we make our Christmas lists for family and friends,

We commit to remember our reason to celebrate.

O God, forgive us when we forget who you are and why you have come. As we prepare for the Prince of Peace to be born in our midst, help us to bring peace to a troubled world and people. As the shepherds and magi looked for you in a stable, let us look for you among those you came to serve. Amen.

(from the "Buy Nothing Christmas Information Kit," www.buynothingchristmas.org/images/resources/pdf/Info_Kit.pdf)

Holy Child of Bethlehem

We pray for all who are homeless.

Holy Child of Bethlehem, born in a stable,

We pray for all who live in poverty.

Holy Child of Bethlehem, rejected stranger,

We pray for all who are lost, alone, all who cry for loved ones.

Holy Child of Bethlehem, whom Herod sought to kill,

We pray for all who live with danger, all who are persecuted.

Holy Child of Bethlehem, a refugee in Egypt,

We pray for all who are far from their homes.

Holy Child of Bethlehem, in you God was pleased to dwell,

Help us, we pray, to see the divine image in people everywhere.

(from the "Buy Nothing Christmas Information Kit," www.buynothingchristmas.org/images/resources/pdf/Info_Kit.pdf)

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- † NCH—New Century Hymnal (UCC)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

• QUOTES •

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Justice cannot be for one side alone, but must be for both.

Eleanor Roosevelt

There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.

G.K. Chesterton

Christmas is a school for consumerism - in it we learn to equate delight with materialism. We celebrate the birth of One who told us to give everything to the poor by giving each other motorized tie racks.

Bill McKibben

Our Christmas cheer turns sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities overwhelm us. Buying fair-trade gifts and celebrating Christmas within the context of the Christian year are two humble practices for disentangling the holy day from consumerism.

F. Matthew Schobert, Jr.

• VIGNETTE •

ALTERNATIVE CHRISTMAS MARKET

UNITED CHURCH OF CHAPEL HILL (UCC)

In the early 1980's, several United Church of Chapel Hill members began having conversations about combating the ever-increasing consumerism accompanying each Christmas season. One member in particular, Elizabeth Greenlee, had a vision to create an alternative Advent season, and soon the idea spread rapidly throughout the congregation. Obvious questions began to surface: what would it mean to offer an alternative? What would it look like? As Jill Edens, co-pastor of United Church, puts it, "we were looking for ways for people to avoid the mall altogether" during the Christmas season—a formidable task!

At this same time, United Church began holding classes based on Alternatives for Simple Living's "Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?" a yearly publication designed to offer ideas and products that can keep Christmas "Christ-centered." Young parents in the church, including the pastors, Rick and Jill Edens, also began having conversations about combating consumerism in their own families. From these classes and conversations, the idea arose to begin a yearly offering (called a "gift of life") to Church World Service during the Advent season.

After several years, these "gift of life" offerings expanded to include donations to Interfaith Council, Habitat for Humanity, and One-World Market, among others. As United Church began to realize how much money was being raised for these missions, they began inviting recipients of their offerings to the church during the Advent season. Tables were set up for these organizations, providing space for them to educate congregants on their mission activities through handouts and videos.

According to Church World Service, United Church's Alternative Christmas Market has grown into one of the largest of its kind in the country. The Market has expanded to include, along with the original "gifts of life" to Church World Service, arts and crafts from around the world; gifts of time and service from church members that are sold or auctioned to benefit the market; and craft and food items made by church groups.

The proceeds of Market are divided between Church World Service and a designated mission outreach program of United Church. Last year, the Market raised over \$30,000, with close to \$20,000 going to Church World Service and \$2,500 going to the North Carolina Council of Churches.

Jill Edens feels that the Alternative Christmas Market is "a creative and fun way to find resources for missions. It is a festive way to give 'gifts that give twice:' once to the recipient, and also to the service project that receives the money. The Market has become an alternative celebration."

For more information, go to www.unitedchurch.org or contact the United Church of Chapel Hill office, 919-942-3540.

• CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES •

- W www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/index-areas.html - North Carolina Council of Churches' "Work of the Council Page," which includes links to: criminal justice, economic justice, environmental justice, racial justice, and others.
- W www.ncjustice.org – North Carolina Justice Center, 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.
- W 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.
- W www.ncpeacejustice.org – North Carolina Peace & Justice Coalition, a coalition of various organizations devoted to fighting injustice.
- W 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.
- W 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.
- W 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

DID YOU KNOW?

- q The income gap between North Carolina's richest and poorest families is widening again, following a brief pause after the last economic boom. The income gap between the state's richest 20 percent of families and the poorest 20 percent of families is now the nation's 10th worst.¹
- q The Institute of Medicine estimates that at least 18,000 Americans—approximately 530 North Carolinians—die prematurely each year simply because they lack health insurance. In addition, being born into a household without health insurance increases the probability of death before the age of one by about 50 percent. At least 1.3 million North Carolinians are currently without health insurance.²
- q Globally, almost half of the world's total population—nearly 3 billion people—live on less than \$2 per day.³
- q According to UNICEF, about 30,000 people die every single day from preventable, poverty-related causes.⁴
- q The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the poorest 48 nations (i.e. a quarter of the world's countries) is less than the wealth of the world's three richest people combined.⁵
- q The most industrialized nations in the world contain about twenty percent of the world's population but consume about 85 percent of the world's resources.⁶
- q In 1998, the United Nations Development Programme set out to document the vast inequalities in the spending priorities of industrialized nations. Their findings debunk the myth that there are not resources in the world to provide for the basic needs of people in developing countries, who represent about two thirds of the world's population. To provide a basic education for all people would cost an additional \$6 billion per year; Americans spend \$8 billion on cosmetics per year. To provide clean water and basic sanitation for all people would cost an additional \$9 billion per year; Europeans spend \$11 billion on ice cream per year. To provide basic reproductive healthcare for all women would cost an additional \$12 billion—the same amount that Americans and Europeans spend on perfumes. To provide access to basic healthcare and nutritious food for all people would cost an additional \$13 billion; by contrast, tobacco companies spend \$15.4 billion annually marketing tobacco products in the United States.⁷
- q The amount that rich countries currently spend on HIV/AIDS, a human security threat that claims 3 million lives a year, represents three days' spending on military hardware.⁸
- q Americans spent about \$440 billion for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukah in 2005. This amount is almost \$200 billion more than all charitable giving. Americans surveyed indicated that they planned on average to spend nearly \$1,000 per person for Christmas. In 2001, Americans spent about \$6.4 billion on holiday decorations, lights and trees. By contrast, global spending on HIV/AIDS was only \$6.1 billion in 2004—less than Americans spent on decorations and a mere 1.3 percent of what Americans spent at retail stores in December.⁹

1. North Carolina Justice Center, "The Rich and the Rest: Income Inequality Accelerates in N.C.," www.ncjustice.org/headlines/details.php?id=614.

2. United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report 2005," <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005>. See also Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Health Insurance Coverage: Estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, 2005," www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/insur200606.pdf.

3. United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report, 2005."

4. Global Issues, "Causes of Poverty: Poverty Facts and Stats," <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp?p=1>.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. See also Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, "Toll of Tobacco in the United States of America," www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0072.pdf.

8. United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report, 2005."

9. National Retail Federation, "2005 Holiday Survival Kit," www.nrf.com/download/holidaysurvivalkit05.pdf. Giving USA Foundation, "2005 Annual Report Press Release," www.aafrc.org/gusa/GUSA05_Press_Release.pdf. American Research Group, "2005 Christmas Spending Plans Slip Below \$1000," www.americanresearchgroup.com/holiday. "The Christmas Decorating Market," http://retailindustry.about.com/library/bl/03q1/bl_um020303a.htm. See also JournAIDS, "Fact Sheet: HIV/AIDS Funding," www.journ-aids.org/funding.php.