

Living in comfortable America, Christians sometimes forget the backdrop of Scripture
People are tempted to look at it as a Constitution for Christianity
...a rule book on how to live the Christian life
Rather than a story of God's interaction with a people called to follow God
A people that sometimes listened and sometimes did not
A people that more often than not were oppressed by foreign powers
Sometimes within their own country—as by the Romans at time of Jesus
Sometimes they were taken into captivity, living in exile—as in Babylon

The Advent Scriptures are addressed to people who lived in fear
The threat of terrorism was a reality for the exiles in the days of the Hebrew prophets
For those who lived under Rome's heavy hand in Jesus' homeland
For the scattered early Christians to whom Paul was writing
Advent promises the coming of God's great reversal—
Swords changed into plowshares
The lowly lifted up and the powerful brought low
The hope of God with us—Emmanuel

I've been thinking about what it was like to live in exile and under foreign occupation
Something I've never known
The closest I have come to it was being in Palestine/Israel at Christmas time
Seeing firsthand the oppression of Palestinians—I could leave, they could not
Roads blocked for no good reason
Lack of water and electricity while others a short distance away had plenty
A refugee camp of people living in exile for over 60 years
Check points that hassled people
Guns—lots of them
The scrutiny of my person and my luggage flying in and out of the country
And this is only a smattering of what people live with day after day

This week the news has been full of the shooting in San Bernardino
It seems like every time I turn around, there is another tragedy
Last summer, it was shootings in Charleston
In June 2014, it was on the campus of Seattle Pacific
One never knows when it will happen next and if a loved one will be impacted

The news from Syria and the Middle East continues to be troublesome
As people struggle under oppression, facing desperate choices, none of which are good
Around the world people live under oppressive regimes and fear for their lives

It is to these people that the message of Advent is given
To people oppressed and living in exile

Isaiah 9:6-7 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 61:1-3 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach 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 and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Malachi 3:1 "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

A poem written by Madeleine L'Engle

First Coming

by Madeleine L'Engle

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

God came to earth as a human baby—living among us, fully human, yet fully God—a mystery
God came—not in a time of calm and peace on a quiet, peaceful night like the pictures show
But in the midst of strife, oppression, exile, wars, suffering, and pain

Yet, to that broken world, God gives a promise of hope and transformation—a promise of the Messiah
A promise of peace and love, of joy and new life
That promise is answered one life at a time as we open ourselves to the mystery of God
But it isn't just a personal promise of salvation and peace
It is a promise that there is a new way to live—that we can live in harmony with one another
That the ways of God are transformative and give life

Jesus repeated Isaiah 61—see **Luke 4:18-19**

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because 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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It is our mandate as well—We must set the captive free!

We are called to be the Kingdom of God—living God's upside down way in our world
By doing so, we enact healing and peace in our world
How do we live in such a way that it invites others to live in a way that is different?
That invites others to lay down their swords and turn them into plowshares
That says there can be a new way of being on this earth that embraces us all in harmony
That bears witness outward to the God we know within through our testimonies—
The Quaker testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, equality, and community
Are we willing to work together to live into this experiment of living out our truth?

This Christmas are we simply caught up in the frivolity?

Or do we live into the transformation of our world as we engage those around us?
Living into the promise of God given to those in exile
A promise of hope and new life for all people, everywhere!

Elizabeth Todd writes from Ramallah: "...we know that Christmas is not about denying the ugliness and relentless pain and confusion of the world, or pretending that treats from Santa Claus will make it better. No. Christmas is facing into the darkness holding the light we have been given by God. We remember that the Light shines in the darkness and declare, by the power of God, that no darkness can overcome it. Jesus Christ, light of the world, has come, is here, and is coming. We live and learn and pray, work and love in Jesus' name, finding ways to express God's love to people trapped in this conflict."