

2012 Advent Reflections

Advent is a season dedicated to intentionally remembering what being a disciple of Christ is about. It is about the hope that we have to see things here on earth as it is in heaven. In our society today, especially in workers' lives, we see too much of what is dark: corporate greed, bullying, disrespect, and a parent's deep desire to make a living to provide for their children.

Advent is a reminder that there is hope even in the midst of darkness; that our mission here at IWJ is to work towards justice because of that hope that we have.

This Advent, we invite you to join us in reflecting on the gifts of work, community and justice.

Interfaith



Worker Justice

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Week 1

December 3

A Reflection on Romans 13:11-14

By Troy Jackson, IWJ Board Member

As December 21, 2012 approaches, and with it what some believe to be the end of the Mayan Calendar, prophecies of Apocalyptic doom are as rampant as they have been since the Y2K scare of late 1999. The hype around this date reminds me of the title of a 1980s R.E.M. song: "It's the End of the World as We Know It."

Unfortunately, for the labor movement, the past few decades have seen "the end of the world as we know it," with restrictions on collective bargaining and so-called "right to work" laws gaining steam. Unions in the United States are under attack.

At least a portion of the responsibility for the successful assault on labor lies with the faith community. After standing with labor a century ago, clergy and congregations became complacent as unions grew in strength and influence. Preaching and teaching failed to connect work and unions to faith in meaningful ways, resulting in compartmentalized lives, in which weekend worship has little to do with the work week.

During Advent, we Christians remember and declare a different

reality: that with the coming of Jesus, we truly experience the end of the world as we have known it. With Jesus, hope emerges, love is unleashed, and justice for all is established. And we are called to be partners in this new world, brought to light through Jesus:

"Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;" – Romans 13:11-12

Labor is in trouble. It is high time for us to know what time it is. No, I don't believe we are a few days away from the end of the world, but we are facing a crisis in the labor movement. It is time for the faith community to wake up from our slumber and shine light on the dignity and rights of labor. And in so doing, let us remember that the members of labor unions are also members of our congregations, who desperately need us to stand with them, bringing the light of Jesus.

A Reflection on Exodus 5:1-2

“Which Lord will you acknowledge?”

By Rachel Jurkowski, North Park Theological Seminary

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.”

– Exodus 5:1-2

History has a notoriously long and checkered past regarding the exploitation of others, particularly of laborers. As harsh and unreasonable as Pharaoh was to the Israelites he had enslaved and forced into hard labor, he was not the first, the last, the worst, or particularly outstanding in the unjust treatment of his workers.

Vast inequality of wealth and power in a society has – and does – result in abuse of those in the lower classes, including the working class. Whether it is Pharaoh or the CEO of a major multinational corporation, when that much power and wealth is concentrated in only a few hands, power and wealth will corrupt them. In Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh shows no compassion, justice, or mercy to his laborers. He refuses to give them any rest or respite from their work. In fact, if you read beyond verse 2, you will find that Pharaoh actually commands the supervisors to make their labor more difficult! Power and wealth are his gods, so why would he need to acknowledge or obey Yahweh, Lord of the Israelites?

Listening and obeying Yahweh and choosing to treat his laborers humanely would diminish Pharaoh’s gods of wealth and power. The gods Pharaoh worshiped are the same gods worshiped on Wall Street today. Greed, wealth,

power, and personal fortune may have morphed from ruling over all Egypt to owning yachts, an impressive 401k, and the newest limited edition Mercedes-Benz, but they remain the same destructive forces they have always been on society.

The good news is that those gods, those false idols, are nothing compared with God. We know the end of the Exodus story. Yahweh prevails, punishes Pharaoh and his realm with plagues and destruction, and liberates his people from their oppressors. The laborers are set free from the soul-wrenching, brutal work they were forced to do for many years, and they were finally able to set out for the Promised Land. Was it easy? No. It took courage, strength, endurance, persistence, vision, and faith – which were all provided by the God who loved his people tremendously. The God who still loves his people tremendously. He still hears the cries of those who labor under awful conditions, who are desperate for respite and rescue, and He will answer them.

The question is this: will we continue to compliantly allow the gods of power and wealth to retain their hold over our society, or will we hear these cries for help and respond obediently to living out God’s call for justice?

*A Reflection on Luke 1:68-79**By Zach Lovig, Pastor*

Just over nine months to do nothing but listen and think – that is Zechariah’s path to the words at the end of Luke one. Over nine months to ponder Gabriel’s message of his miraculous son’s work. Three months to ponder Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55 in which Jesus’ mother declared that God would bring down the rulers and lift up the humble. After these months of silence, Zechariah’s voice returns and his Spirit-inspired song declares the blessing of God who raises the horn of salvation and has remembered the promise of their ancestors.

But when his song turns to a meditation on his son, John, Zechariah uses the words at the beginning of Isaiah 40, of the servant who prepares the way for the king who guides in peace. Hear the words of Isaiah, “A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Many are the cautions to remember that God is coming to save from sin and not simply political oppression, and right we will be to remember that powers from within, not without, are what afflict us with greatest fervor. To make straight the path for the Lord reminds us of a king coming in strength; rulers torn from their thrones is the language of conquest. When Zechariah declares that his infant

son will call for a straight way for this coming king, we need to understand that this is not a king marching against Rome. It is a king marching against us and our nature. We are preparing the way for the Lord who will demand that we lay down our lust for power in support of the weak.

The coming Lord marches against sin as it truly is. In those months of silence, Zechariah was forced to slow down enough to see the nature of sin all around: the old and godless belief that humanity needs to fend for itself against a world that is cruel and chaotic. Such a worldview declares that, in the name of self-preservation and security, one needs power and that some people are expendable in this acquisition of power.

As Advent advances, we rehearse the truth of the coming Lord that forces us to remember the call to make straight the paths for the one who will redeem us. But the call requires the sacrifice of complacency. The prophecy of Zechariah and the call of John is the King’s advance upon us. Our strongholds are obvious.

In the name of national security we advance foreign policies which exclusively focus on our own self-interests. In the name of frugality we support low prices at the Hyatt Hotels regardless of the many worker-rights’ violations. We routinely neglect the voices of the humble and propagate a sinful cynicism which forces our neighbors to the margin. In preparation of the march, let us consider the example of Zechariah this Advent, and voluntarily listen to the people of on the fringes for the sake of the coming King.

December 10

A Reflection on Malachi 3:1-4

By Evelmyn Ivens, North Park Theological Seminary

The book of Malachi speaks from a context where the Second Temple had been built; however, the ideal period was yet to come. So, it was a community that was living in a transitional time with discouragement and where the people questioned the love and justice of God. In many ways we are living a similar situation after experiencing presidential elections and waiting for the many changes to come in Capitol Hill. Also after facing natural disasters in the East Coast – it sets a very transitional tone not only affecting our country but those around the world as well.

At this time we are also questioning God's love and justice. All we have to do is look at the difficulties that workers face, many earning wages so low that they can't even afford to pay for basic necessities like food and shelter. There is an increasing number of people, for example, showing up at food pantries around the country because they don't make enough to pay for food. Many times these workers also have limited health insurance benefits or no health insurance at all. We can also take a look at homeless and unemployment statistics showing high numbers. Also many around the world are experiencing war and oppression, and millions are suffering from human trafficking.

These are very challenging times, and just as the prophet Malachi spoke to his Second Temple audience, he is also speaking to us. First of all, he is calling for a life in the community of faith where there is

mutual support. He tells parents to love their children, husbands to love their wives, and for the community to love the poor. The prophet also calls the people to keep the commandments.

In Malachi 3:1-4 the prophet talks about a messenger, someone that would come "to prepare the way" of the Lord. As we enter into the Advent season, how are we preparing for such a significant event? Are we keeping those commandments? Are we leaning towards those who are oppressed? How are we helping those workers earning low wages? What are we doing for our neighbors? In these verses the prophet challenges us to reflect if we are truly ready to "endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" Are we pleasing offerings to the Lord by what we have accomplished?

As we reflect on these questions and on the words of the prophet Malachi, let us pray...

"Creator God, we thank you for your love, mercy, and justice. We thank you for your messenger Jesus Christ, and as we prepare for the Advent season make us aware of those facing injustices in our country and around the world. Help us discern the better ways to get involve and advocate on behalf on those who don't have the access to do it for themselves. Restore our hearts and minds so we can be pleasing offerings to you. Help us, Oh God to live in the community of faith, lend a hand for each other and love just as you love us. In your name we pray, Amen"

A Reflection on Matthew 5:43-45

Why Should I Love My Oppressor?

By Amber Nelson, North Park Theological Seminary

“You have heard that it is said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” – Matthew 5:43-45

Advent is a season of waiting – waiting so that we can learn how we should live between Christ’s incarnation and his return. Those who fight for worker justice know a lot about waiting – the kind of active waiting encouraged in Advent. Strikes, picket lines, and negotiation tables are places where active waiting takes place – where those in this movement stand and ask for just wages and working conditions, for full-time positions and affordable health care.

Much of this waiting, though, is precipitated by those who oppose the work of organizers. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King sums it up well: “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed... For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

Part of the waiting – especially in opposition to another who causes the waiting – can be a hardness of heart against those who oppress. This seems reasonable – when one is campaigning against a hotel chain that requires its housekeepers to work at an inhumane pace, or boycotting a big box store that refuses to give employees full-time positions, it is self-protection to demonize the other.

In the midst of this very reasonable idea, Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount break in. This sermon in the book of Matthew moves from action-oriented narrative to give specific teaching about the Kingdom of God and how one should live in that Kingdom. We see a reversal. Jesus quotes our very reasonable idea: “You have heard it said, ‘You should love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” He then turns it around, saying: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...”

Why does loving and praying for our enemy make us children of our

A Reflection on Matthew 5:43-45 (cont.)

Father in heaven? When we love our enemy, we are reminded that they are human – made in the image of God. This, in turn, reminds us to embrace our own humanity. We too are made in the image of God, made to love God and the other. We are children of our Father in heaven when we do not stoop to the level of our oppressors, but mercifully pray that both oppressor and oppressed might be free from what binds so as to love and serve.

Now, I have never had a hotel manager turn heat lamps on me and other protestors during a heat wave. I have never been refused a living wage or the right to organize by my

employer. I don't know what it feels like to struggle daily against a business that seems to have government, money, and power on its side. But it does seem to me that Jesus' words are a difficult but healing balm which allow us to seek justice without losing ourselves in the process. This doesn't mean backing down or giving up the fight. It means continuing to actively wait, praying and trusting ourselves and our enemies to the God makes the sun rise on us both.

During this season of Advent, may God give us the grace to love our enemies, even in the waiting.

December 14

A Reflection on 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

By JR Green, North Park Theological Seminary Student/IWJ Organizer

For the past few months, I have been in the process of having my mind blown and my paradigm shifted. The curtain was pulled back on my perceptions of what it meant to be a worker in this country, and all the injustices that land squarely on the shoulders of those who are working the hardest. The idea of fairness and justice, the very narrative of our American Dream, had crumbled in my mind. It has moved me to action and to anger. But somewhere in the middle of all this, I seem to have lost a very crucial part of what it means to fight.

When faced with a fight for justice, the anger part is easy. It doesn't take a whole lot to rouse the wrath of someone who has been continually subjected to an unjust and unfair system. People who work long hours at multiple jobs to scrape together a meager wage to take care of a family. People who do what they are told, and work hard only to be faced with more and more dehumanizing policies. These people are not hard to get angry and to get into the fight. The more inequality we suffer the more willing we are to actually do something about it.

But is that where we end? Sure, we are all about winning the fight.

We have to hold out hope that we will win justice for ourselves and others, but somewhere in all this should we not also consider the idea of reconciliation. It is easy to fight, but is it easy to understand where the end can be?

In today's passage we see that Christ was the agent of reconciliation between ourselves and God. Paul makes it clear elsewhere in his letters that we were not in tune with God. Yet, somehow the message that Christ and God delivers is not one of pure judgment and anger but one of reconciliation and love. Here we see that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and most amazingly does not hold our transgressions against us. Then Paul goes on to make the even more intense declaration that we are therefore "ambassadors for Christ," preaching the message of reconciliation and carrying that word with us wherever we go.

Some days it seems like all we have is anger. Those days when you hear another story about how the Hyatt Corporation is instituting a system that tracks each housekeeper and times their every room while purposefully sending them in a scattershot throughout the hotel.

A Reflection on 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (cont.)

Or when you hear a story of people being held in permanent temporary jobs because they are unable to ever get a permanent job due to having been hired by a temp. agency, even though that was the only way to get in the door. Or when you see the profit a company makes and compare it to the low wages they hand out. We get that injustice is done and something has to be done about it. But, what if instead of organizing ourselves into war battalions to march against our enemies we remember that we are ambassadors of reconciliation. Here

we find that we are not angrily asking for change but looking for a way to bridge our own differences and come together. Imagine a world where company and worker worked for a common goal. Imagine a place where they found their commonality, not in the work as an end in itself, but in the dignity in being human that both have. In the end, I think our work needs to center itself, not on wrath, but on love and reconciliation. We cannot do this work until we love those who stand against us more than we want to change them.

Week 3

December 17

A Reflection on Luke 7:18-23

By JR Green and Marcus Simmons – North Park Theological Seminary Students

I tend to spend a lot of my time looking forward to something else. Wherever I am, the question of what comes next nags at my head until I can no longer see what is in the present. I am pretty sure that I am not the only one like this. Our world is constantly at a rush, pushing us further and faster as it wants us to see the future and not the now.

Today's passage has people with the same perspective. Disciples of John the Baptist have been confused for some time. John had proclaimed the coming of the Lord, the coming of the Messiah, and he directed people to look towards Jesus. But, John was now in jail and his disciples unsure that this Jesus fellow was the guy they were looking for. Coming to Jesus they have serious questions. "Are you the one we're looking for?" If not they are willing to wait and look again. There's a dread and anticipation that you can hear echoing in their voice.

But, Jesus responds by reminding them of what they have seen and heard. Healing of the sick, sight to the blind, the dead being raised. Jesus directs his listeners to a passage they would all know in Isaiah and claims those attributes and actions as his own. There is no one else to wait for. The answer is here.

When we are in the fight for labor, we often are looking forward to the next victory or even our next fight. We have a tendency to focus on the future and not see the activity of God in the present. The victory of God is that his kingdom

is breaking into this world through the work of Jesus and the ministry of the Spirit. We are already there and yet waiting for more. As we look at our future hope, let us not lose sight of what is around us. We can organize and win because we know that we are ambassadors of the kingdom of heaven.

I asked my friend Marcus to help me write this, as he has a great voice on these matters and he wrote me back a response that I think fits quite well here:

Christ does not simply proclaim freedom and solidarity. Rather, Christ shows himself to be a liberator and friend by his actions. As a community preparing to celebrate the coming of Christ, we anticipate proof of the good news to come. We anticipate transformation in our communities. We anticipate that even in the midst of abuse, mishandling and oppression, God is with us. Christ shows himself to those who go looking for Him. The good news in this passage is that God does not desire to be apart from us. God does not desire that freedom and transformation be things that we can only look forward to, but rather Christ has come to make these realities here and now. We receive sight, ability, healing, awareness, new life, and help where we need it. When we participate in securing our rights and dignity as human beings, we are participating in the activity of God.

Let us spend today focusing not only on the future hope of the kingdom but the already arrived joy that rests upon us.

A Reflection on Isaiah 52:7-9

By Sung Yeon Choi-Morrow, Interfaith Worker Justice Organizer

In this passage, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news...” (Is. 52:7), the good news refers to the verses that precede it, which talk about deliverance from captivity and oppression. The good news during this Advent season is that we look forward to the coming of Christ, who, throughout his public ministry was the “beautiful feet” on the mountains. His constant message was to bring attention to the hypocrisy of the leaders who were so busy concerning themselves with keeping the law for the sake of the law rather than bringing glory to God.

Over and over again Jesus brings messages and performs miracles that reflect deliverance from captivity, be it the bleeding woman who was healed or the leper who got healed. For the woman, the

healing was not just a physical healing but one that liberated her from exclusion and allowed her to become a part of society again. For the leper, his healing also gave back his place in society. It was about dignity.

In the same way, today, many are robbed of their dignity because of corporate greed. Dads and moms are unable to decently provide for their children because they cannot earn a living wage even if they work 60 or 80 hours a week. Children are being raised by others or by TV because moms and dads have to work such long hours just to try and make ends meet.

Our job, our calling as people of God is to be the beautiful feet on the mountains and bring good news. Our mission at IWJ, to bring justice in the workplace is the good news that Isaiah is talking about.

A Reflection on Luke 1:46-55

By The Rev. Sam Pullen, Associate Pastor, Resurrection Covenant Church

I worked at a Walmart store for two years back when I was in high school. I'm not going to pretend that they were not good to me in many ways. They worked around my school and sports schedules and paid me enough to get gas and go to movies with friends. Besides, it was one of the few places in my small Indiana town that would hire a young punk like me. But I was a teenager who still lived with my parents and nearly had any responsibilities.

I worked alongside a number of adults with homes, children, bills and debt. I found that many of my coworkers also had other jobs to supplement their minimum wage job at Walmart. Believe me, working at Walmart is nothing like what you see in commercials. Paired with the low pay is virtually no job autonomy. On top of that, I observed people being scheduled just enough hours to be useful to the corporation but too few hours to qualify for benefits of any kind. This combination creates an environment of misery and a situation where one is never quite employed enough to live with any comfort or security.

Does this seem fair? Shouldn't someone say something? Shouldn't there be people to speak on the behalf of the workers? Well I remember sitting in my training at Walmart

and watching a video on the "evils" of unionizing. In the video, a shady looking man lurks through the store slipping people his card and trying to lure them into his "union of thieves". It was serious propaganda. The union guy looked like a villain from a silent film who was ready to tie you up and place you on a train track.

Talk about "low status". Mary knew this feeling all too well. Mary lived in a time when the Jewish people were not free to live as they wanted. This was true throughout much of the Jewish history. They were a conquered people. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Syria, Greece, Rome... All of the world powers seemed to have gotten a piece of the Hebrews. In Mary's world, the Roman imperial power had their foot on the neck of God's chosen people.

So it makes you wonder why Mary was singing as if everything was perfect? People are still hungry, many are still poor, and you better believe that the powerful are still clinging on to their power. "The Mighty One has done great things for me (emphasis added)." Jesus hasn't even been born yet and is still thirty-plus years from the cross.

Was Mary just very optimistic? Did she think this was her one-way ticket to easy street? Was her head in

A Reflection on Luke 1:46-55 (cont.)

the “great by and by” as she ignored the present suffering?

I don’t think so. She was a poor, unwed, pregnant teenager. I think she was well aware that she didn’t have an easy life ahead of her. The thing is that she trusted the words of God’s messenger (vv. 26-38).

If Jesus is the “Son of the Most High” then God’s kingdom and reign were about to collide in a very tangible way with his existence. This future that God has planned for us is about to show up on the scene. And when Mary sings her song (The Magnificat) she is celebrating the fact that God is coming to set this broken world right.

And again, yes, things are not perfect yet, but Mary is being subversive. This is a protest song! This is Mary’s “With God on Our Side” or “A Change is Gonna Come”. The Son of the Most High is about to turn the present order upside-down.

And perhaps in the greatest play of irony, Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, was a humble Jewish man who died the ordinary death of a criminal. But not even death, the imperial power’s ultimate, final weapon

could stop what God was doing.

When we gather for prayer vigils outside of Walmart or any oppressive institution then we too can sing songs of celebrations. We, like Mary, are able to live into this future Kingdom of God where the humble are made great. Even in the midst of our low-status we are able to expose the greed of such corporations.

Just as Jesus’ death only truly exposed the fear of the Roman government, the more stores they close due to workers demanding due respect and pay, the more it highlights to the world that this is an institution that feeds on the those already marginalized and thrives on exploitation. You don’t kill movements that don’t threaten your way of life.

So yes, we gather and we celebrate the change that will come as if it is here right now because God is using us, God’s humble servants, to create the coming Kingdom now!

So let us sing, because the Mighty One has done great things for us!

Christ has died, Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.

Amen.

Week 4

December 24

A Reflection on Revelation 21:1-5

“See, the home of God is among mortals.” Rev. 21:3

By David Wildman, United Methodist Church – General Board of Global Ministries

Our daughter and son were both born the week after Christmas. Each year our family experiences the hopes, the waiting and the expectations of Advent as very tangible, very earthy, and very fragile. The incarnation, God making a home with us mortals, like the birth of a baby, transforms our lives here and now! God’s vulnerability as a new born reveals how much God depends on our loving actions too!

Reading the text of Rev. 21:1-5 in Advent reminds us that Emmanuel, God with us, is not a one-time event that happened long ago, but God’s ongoing revolution in our lives and relationships with our neighbors today! The new heaven and new earth that Revelation depicts is not somewhere far off, but here among us now. A new Jerusalem coming into our lives is not built in a day. It embodies a promise to make all things new! The burden of old unjust, exploitative work relations will be replaced with relationships built on love, respect and justice for all its people.

But wait! Today, like in first century Palestine, all too many low wage workers live lives stuck in advent – a season of frustrated hopes, endless waiting, and lowered expectations – where Christmas never seems to come. We crave a quick fix to end the injustice and indignity that ravage workers’ lives. Do something God to end the widening inequality and exploitation that are tearing our society apart!

We are waiting for God to bring justice

into our world. Yet this night, Emmanuel, the babe born in a manger, also waits for our hands to wipe away one another’s tears, to put an end to mourning. The text in Revelation is not calling us to a handkerchief ministry but an incarnational ministry of solidarity and love. As Mother Jones, the great labor organizer, declared, “Don’t mourn! Organize!”

Low wage workers in the early church who primarily heard the Bible read aloud would have heard the words of Isaiah echoed in the reading from Revelation 21. For Isaiah, God’s new heaven, new earth and new Jerusalem are to be built on a foundation of economic justice: “No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat... They will not toil in vain.” (see Isaiah 65:17-25)

For more than 16 years Interfaith Worker Justice has mobilized workers and faith communities to be about the work of a God who is making a home among us whose foundation is justice. This advent IWJ has joined with Walmart workers and warehouse workers to build a new Jerusalem where no one’s wages will be stolen. Each of the many worker centers and IWJ affiliates across the US embody a bit of a new Jerusalem as together we build communities founded on respect, equality and just wages. We invite you this advent to join with Interfaith Worker Justice in this incarnational labor of love. A new city of justice is on the way!