

Advent Reflections From Congo



Joseph Mulamba-Mandangi (DRC, 1964–), *Nativity*, 1997



Week 1: *An Overflowing Hope*

It is said that a human being cannot survive for more than eight to twenty-one days without food and water. None can live for a day without hope. Yet our people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have persistently lived in a cycle of hope and despair for more than a century. People frequently have dreams, yet their leaders consistently breach the promises they make. It's challenging to recover, but individuals eventually dream once again. The Congolese experience is hardly one of hope and constructive progress, especially in the east. Despite living in a country with abundant natural resources, including the second-largest forest in the world and all types of minerals in vast quantities, despair has often replaced hope, becoming ingrained in the mindset. Corruption, greed, bloody conflicts, sexual and gender-based violence, and lack of the rule of law, are common. We know there is a problem, but we don't feel we have the power to fix it.

Desmond Tutu once told *The New York Times*, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." Lailah Gifty Akita wrote in *The Wings of Hope: Survivor*, "Hope is holding on to the promises of God." Martin Luther King, Jr. said in the collection *In My Own Words*, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." The Apostle Paul prayed, "*May the God of hope fill you all with joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 15:13). Paul firmly believed that no matter what our circumstances, we can have abundant hope in God. For Paul, those who trust in God do not have time to be gloomy. Just the opposite, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, persistent in prayer" (Romans 12:12). Paul often talks of hope as a future expectation (i.e., Romans 8:23-25). As God's people, we must not only embody hope but also create hope in our immediate surroundings as well as in distant places.

It is this hope that inspired the vision for Congo Initiative - Université Chrétienne Bilingue du Congo (CI-UCBC) in 2007. Now, over 800 alumni embody this hope and our motto of "being transformed to transform" as they work across various fields and sectors in Congo and beyond. Over 300 children receive an education through CI-UCBC primary schools. Our community engagement efforts are addressing land rights, renewing families and the church, healing wounds from grief and trauma, providing justice for those wrongfully imprisoned, and being a voice for those who are often not heard. All of this, rooted in the hope that with God, change is possible.

May God's abundant hope be renewed in you throughout this Advent season, and may God use you to spread hope to people in your communities and across the world.

In Hope,

Drs. David and Kaswera Kasali



Week 2: “He will be called ... Prince of Peace”
Isaiah 9:6

There is no peace without disturbance or unsettlement. Isaiah talks about the coming of the Son of God (Isaiah 9:1-7. Against a background of war and destruction, darkness and gloom, Isaiah gave this prophecy about the Messiah – the Prince of Peace. He is called the Prince of Peace because His peace is ever present amidst all circumstances, for God reigns over them all.

As I write this piece, I wonder how I can preach about peace at this exact moment when my home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, is going through instability caused both by foreign and internal armed groups. When women, children, and men are dying of hunger because they have left their villages, which are occupied by the rebels. How can we talk about peace at this moment when its opposite is true around the globe (wars, cruelty, disasters, discrimination, injustice, violence, the pandemic, etc.)?

Peace is like the heaters in our houses during the coldest period of winter. Peace is like a heated jacket one wears as they go out in very cold weather. These heaters or jackets are useless in the hottest season of the year. For us to understand the meaning of real peace, we often need to experience that its opposite is real. Since everyone is affected by the absence of peace, no one can provide peace except God. So, we find comfort in the words of the Prince of Peace, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid” (John 14:27, NIV).

As long as we live in this fallen world, we need the peace that comes only from the Lord to keep our spirit, soul, and body safe and keep us moving forward. Our life is like traveling on bumpy dirt roads (those are very common here in DR Congo). If you do not have solid shock absorbers, you will not be able to make a mile. The shock absorber that keeps us moving in this fallen world is the peace provided by Jesus in our hearts and communion with one another. During this Advent season, let us completely surrender to the Prince of Peace to take over. Let us ask Him to walk with us on our bumpy dirt roads, during the cold seasons of life, where only His peace will sustain us and install hope and perseverance in our hearts.

In Peace,

Joel and Esperance Asiimwe

1) Ross, A. (2004). The Glorious Messiah and the Messianic Age. Bible.Org. <https://bible.org/seriespage/6-glorious-messiah-and-messianic-age-isaiah-91-7>

Week 3: *The Joy of Christ Makes us Strong*

The bible says no one comes to Jesus and remains the same. When they turn their eyes to Jesus, all those who are angry, sad, or traumatized by hardships, receive joy.

In the old and new testament, we witness how the people of God could experience joy even amidst difficult circumstances:

“Those who look to him have joyful faces” (Psalm 34:5).

Nehemiah and Ezra recognized that the Lord gives joy which gives strength: “The joy of the Lord makes you strong” (Nehemiah 8:10-12).

Even while in prison, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God (Acts 16:25).

As we celebrate Advent, we celebrate Emmanuel, “God with us.” “He will be a joy and delight to you, His birth will make many people very glad” (Luke 1:15).

Each year we are reminded that God is with us. This is the JOY of the season. But it is present all the time. It doesn’t disappear during difficult times, we just need to seek it. We can rejoice and be happy when things are running well, but there is also joy from God even when things are not. It is then that we are reminded God brings true joy.

In my personal experience, I witness God’s joy even as myself and my community face really hard situations. I ask God to still use me and make me stronger amidst it all. I am reminded that I belong to the Lord – “always be joyful because you belong to the Lord” (Philippians 4:4).

During this season, we are reminded of God’s joy that offers strength beyond our understanding. My prayer is that as a Church, we live into this joy and that my people of Congo live into this joy no matter what we are facing.

In Joy,

Rachel Nyota Mwasi

Week 4: God's Love

Shalom beloved. In this world shaped by crises, wars, disasters, and families divided by conflict, love often seems to be the missing ingredient. Love can appear to be many things, however, the Bible tries to give a deep understanding of the love that God expects us to show as God's human creatures.

1 Corinthians 13:4-6 says: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Paul starts with what is love, he gives his contrast, that is to say, what love is not, and does not do towards others. We cannot separate love from kindness which is its reflection regardless of how we face life's challenges. Those who love have a common character of goodness. Thus, we are called to show kindness to all, forgetting one's interests for the benefit of others, and extending compassion and mercy.

This week, we are reminded of Christ's coming and all that it signifies. We understand that he loved us when we were not worthy of it. This is the love that God expects us to show towards our neighbors no matter how difficult they are, or how they treat us; distant or near, they all are worthy of love. *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and whoever loves is born of God and knows God* (1 John 4:7). Love is the imprint - the reflection of God in us -, that the world comes to know and therefore experiences the love of Christ. As Christ showed us, it is a love towards everyone, to our neighbors and to those who call themselves our enemies.

Unfortunately, the world is often in crisis due to the absence of love - of truly loving our neighbor, strangers, and enemies. But that is our call.

You have heard that it was 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48:)

It is through our expressions and actions of love that holistic transformation of our hearts, mind, and body is made possible and Christ becomes known. May God help us to answer this call with a "Yes," and may He bless us all.

In Love,

Reverend Denis Kalipi



Christmas: *Celebrating Emmanuel, God With Us*

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...”

In the old days, Christmas in the Democratic Republic of Congo was a synonym for rejuvenation. All homes in the village were painted afresh, reflecting an outward splendor which, in many cases, covered multifaceted sufferings and troubles. Today, for many, Christmas is a time of festivities with family members and the sharing of gifts. But still, many hide deep pain and suffering under the cheers. What should Christmas mean for us today in a hurting world? What should its celebration look like in a context where war and disease affects all aspects of life, where uncertainty and insecurity weigh heavy on peoples' hearts, minds, and bodies?

Christmas is a reminder that with Immanuel, we experience God's love and are filled with hope, peace and joy from within. With “a child born to us, a son given to us,” a new era comes as we believe in the one on whose shoulder all things stand. He gives us an end for which to live, justice for the oppressed, and redeems all fault and failure. He has come to be with his people, today and forevermore, as the Wonderful Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Thanks to Him, the light of the world, we have the capacity to shine as beacons of hope and peacemakers in a hurting world.

It is our prayer that this Advent season, every heart will experience Immanuel's light and be filled with new hope, love, joy and peace to as we step into 2023.

Merry Christmas!

Dr. Honoré and Decky Bunduki

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Drs. David and Kaswera Kasali co-founded Congo Initiative in 2005 as they were deeply moved by the continued war in their country while serving at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST). The Kasalis launched UCBC in 2007 with David serving as President and Rector from 2007-2019. Kassie leads the Holistic Family Development programs in Beni which includes La Charité Primary School and Vocational Training and Counseling for Women. David continues to serve as the President Emeritus at CI-UCBC.



Since the very beginning of UCBC, Dr. Bunduki has served passionately as Academic Dean and more recently, Vice-Rector of UCBC. He earned his Ph.D in education from the University of South Africa (UNISA). Affirmed by colleagues, board leadership, and the wider community, Dr. Bunduki was appointed as the second rector of UCBC in 2019. Decky teaches in the UCBC communications faculty and serves as the department's secretary.



Reverend Denis Kalipi is a pastor who leads the Poly Glossa Church in Butembo town. He has a special passion for the development of the youth and offers trainings in leadership and governance. Reverend Kalipi is among notabilities in Butembo town and among church leaders in the North Kivu province. He has been the guest speaker at graduation ceremonies at CI-UCBC programs on several occasions and now serves on CI-UCBC's General Assembly.



Joel and Esperance Asimwe are both UCBC alumni. Both Joel and Espérance serve in the Church Renewal and Global Mission (CRGM) program. Joel is also the chaplain of worship and theology faculty member at UCBC. Espérance serves with CRGM as well.



Rachel Nyota is a UCBC alumna and now serves as the chaplain and finance manager at Académie Bilingue du Congo Primary School.



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