



Advent Reflections from Congo

Week One: Hope

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine...He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us." (Isaiah 25:6-9a)

The suffering is overwhelming. Wherever we turn, in our own lives, the lives of others, or in what we witness in our work or on the news, we encounter the grief constantly: terminal illness, sexual abuse, corruption, hypocrisy, broken relationships, and death.

Advent hope is not about cheap optimism, giving us space to be honest about this. However, we are not just called to authenticity, but faith. We hold both things: lamenting and resisting evil, and also hope in the power of the Living God to overcome it. Interestingly, the same Hebrew word is translated "wait" in some texts and "hope" in others – we wait in hope between two Advents: Christ coming to redeem us through His death and resurrection, and Christ coming to restore all things.

Advent reminds us that God comes to meet a world bent against Him, inviting us, in these short days and the growing darkness, to hope rooted in confidence that He will be as good as His word.

The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'" (Matthew 25:5-6) This text speaks to another reality underlying Advent: the question is not so much whether Christ will come, but whether we will be ready to receive Him. Sometimes it feels like He is "a long time in coming" to put everything right, and rather than watching for Him in hope, we become distracted, exhausted, resigned, cynical.

But He tells us to stay awake, and stay the course, because "hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." (Romans 8:25). Advent connects hope with remembering – this waiting helps us reflect on how God has come to us already, and to watch expectantly for what He will do next.

"Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!" (Psalm 31:24)

In hope,
Christen Price

Week Two: Peace

Damon So's article "The Missionary Journey of the Son of God into the Far Country"* is a reflection about the first coming and mission of Christ into the world. By "far country," he means the whole of creation, suggesting that there is no part of creation that Christ did not come for, and that his journey, although long and perilous, was necessary for the world's holistic redemption. Please join us as we reflect on peace (shalom in Hebrew and einere in Greek) as a central purpose of this journey!

The apostle Peter reveals that the Peace Giver's journey into the far country began "before the foundation of the world" when he was appointed by the Father (1 Peter 1:17-21). Then, as the world experienced the darkness of sin and its consequences for the first time, a divine declaration announced the reversal of this chaotic condition through the Peace Giver (Genesis 3:14-15). Millennia later, in the dark ages of prophet Isaiah, the promise stated that there will be "no more gloom for her who was in anguish ... For a child will be born to us ... And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called ... Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:1-6).

Centuries after, when the Peace Giver alighted on earth, angels, who knew who he was, celebrated: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14). It is peace with God and with others (Ephesians 2:11-19). This is not just a statement, but a reality that individuals can experience like Lazarus and his sisters (John 11:1-46), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the Samaritan woman (John 4), Simon the Leper (Mark 14:3-9), the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28), and many today.

This peace "surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7), as it cannot be hindered by the current condition of tears caused by human weakness, greed, hatred, arrogance and poor governance that the world and the Congo in particular experiences. And, beyond giving peace, the Peace Giver came to raise an army of peacemakers, through which his journey would continue into the far, far world (Romans 12:18; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Matthew 5:9; Hebrews 12:14). This is the Christmas message and reminder: join the Peace Giver's peace business!

As the Congo goes through its dark ages, this Christmas message justifies the existence of CI-UCBC, where young men and women come to be transformed and commissioned to lead transformation into the far corners of the society. The Peace Giver's journey will continue until as many as will welcome him experience complete peace alongside the whole of creation, which includes both individuals and entire nations such as Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine (Revelation 21:3-4). May we be, this Christmas season, peacemakers alongside the Peace Giver in our relationships, communities, and nations, through word and deed, knowing that it will cost us sacrifice as it cost our master a sacrificial long journey!

In peace,
Jean and Linda Musavuli

*https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/261/edited_volume/chapter/3093055

Week Three: Joy

“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.’”
(Luke 1:39-45)

The first two chapters of Luke’s gospel are shot through with the promise of joy, and here in the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary, Elizabeth’s unborn child is the first person in Luke’s gospel to react with joy in the present. We might even say this baby, who will become John the Baptist, is already living into his prophetic vocation specifically in the way he leaps for joy in his mother’s womb. How is John’s joy prophetic? What in-breaking reality does his joy point to?

Mary and Elizabeth weren’t just your normal expectant mothers. In fact, neither of them were supposed to be parents by any natural account—Mary because of her virginity and Elizabeth because of her infertility. And yet, as we come to their blessed meeting, the words of the angel Gabriel ring in our ears from Luke 1:37, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” In the joyful leaping of John in Elizabeth’s womb and in Mary’s surprising pregnancy, we see that Gabriel’s words are proving true. The Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary now proclaims from the lips of Elizabeth and jumps for joy in her unborn child, signaling that yes, indeed, God is doing the impossible—bringing forth new life in the unlikeliest of places.

John’s joyful tumbling is a signpost, pointing toward the truth that the God of Mary and Elizabeth is the God of possibility, in whom all the resources for the salvation and restoration of the world have not yet been exhausted. The glory of Christmas is that the barren world, the world that is not supposed to be fruitful is the world in which the Holy Spirit gestates and births new life for us and our salvation. If this is true, then the unborn John’s joy points to our hope that no amount of evil, pain, suffering, or brokenness is the final word on human existence. Alongside our Congolese brothers and sisters then, let us be prophets of joy—pointing to the truth that the God of possibility has already started making all things new.

In joy,
Emily Hamilton

Week Four: Love

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!
The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him (1 John 3:1).*

This season of the advent is a golden opportunity to remember the love of God lavished on us through Jesus Christ: King of kings, born in a manger to model humility; Lord of lords, revealed to us to show us the way to the Father; Immortal, Invisible, Eternal God, incarnated to rescue us from the entanglement of sin and eternal death. Considering God's love, his protection throughout the year 2023, and his multidimensional blessings graciously showered on us, I am reminded of the words of King David: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them" (Psalm 8:4)?

As we celebrate the incarnation of Christ Jesus, what matters is our response to his unfailing love. He who has cherished us, washed us from every stain, rescued us from certain death, and positioned us to be children of God. The apostle John rightfully recognizes that the world does not know him and it does not know us either, for though we live in the world, our identity is no longer citizens of the world but of the celestial city where we can be called back anytime. The sudden promotion to glory of the denominational leader of the Evangelical Church of Christ in the Center of Africa (CECA 20), on November 14, 2023 in Bunia, insistently reminded me of this truth. Many of our beloved ones have also been called back to be with our Father who has loved them more and has decided to have them with him in the celestial palace. This gives us another strong reminder that with the love of God, and attached to it, is an unshakable hope. Though foreigners and exiles on earth, we are children of God, ambassadors on earth to display his love to all and citizens of the celestial city prepared to reign with Christ.

The Bible tells us that anyone can become a member of God's family. For to all who receive Jesus Christ, all who believe in his name, they are given the right to become children of God (John 1:12). And spreading God's love everywhere we go becomes a responsibility. During the last graduation ceremony at UCBC, on November 11, several students testified of the fact that at CI-UCBC they have found love. Loving one another, Jesus said, is how everyone will know that we are his disciples (John 13:35). May the Lord help us all seek him with a new fervor, know him more, experience and spread his love in a new way as children of his family. At CI-UCBC, we do so through supporting the transformational mission of the organization, promoting integrated education and community engagement initiatives, modeling Christlike character to all, in the spirit of "tuko pamoja."

In love,
Dr. Honoré Bunduki Kwany

Christmas: What does it mean to you?

What does Christmas mean to you? What keywords would you use to describe your Christmas? Ours is divided into two seasons: early childhood and current experience. And what about the Bible?

Joy, Community & Sharing

At an early age, Christmas was defined as joy, community, and sharing. We grew up at Oicha, a mission station in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For us, the mission compound was a community, a large family, with several families of missionaries, nurses, teachers, etc. Local people did not have much. But throughout the year, they saved whatever they could to spend on Christmas. Every person, child, and adult would wear new, colorful clothes on Christmas day. Families would buy chickens, pork, goats, and even beef. Young adults and grown-up children would spend the night presenting Christmas dramas/plays and singing Christmas hymns. On Christmas day, church service would be full, starting at 9 am till 1 pm, with a lot of singing. Families would return home to share and eat like no other day. From 2 to 6 pm, the community would gather on the soccer field for various competitions and gifts for winners. As children, we always wondered why Christmas could not last for several days.

Joy, Hope, & De-traumatization

Today, many people are internally displaced due to the Islamic Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), originally from Uganda, who have occupied surrounding forests, killing farmers randomly. Many families have lost their loved ones as well as properties. Peace is elusive. However, Christmas remains one day that brings joy, hope, and de-traumatization. The focus is on the joy of celebrating another Christmas season with the rest of the world and less on the sorrows of losing loved ones or being displaced. But by and large, the good old days seem gone.

Joy, Love, and Peace

In the Bible and for Christians, Christ's birth is very significant. Christmas as we celebrate today is found in Luke 2:4- 19 and Matthew 2. Jesus is one of the three persons of the Trinity of God. The prophet Isaiah (9:6) predicted the coming of the Messiah to earth: "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." John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Christmas is a manifestation of God's love for human beings, an event that brings joy and peace to the world.

What makes Christmas special to you?

Merry Christmas!
David & Kassie Kasali

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Christen Price is a human rights lawyer who engages in legal advocacy to end impunity for all forms of sexual exploitation. Christen received her JD from Georgetown University Law Center, and a BA in philosophy from Cedarville University. Christen first encountered UCBC in 2010, when she visited Beni as part of a legal internship based in Northern Uganda. She reconnected with Congo Initiative after hearing Paul Robinson, who taught and mentored some of her fellow parishioners, give an update at her church in 2017. Christen is honored and excited to serve on Congo Initiative's board.



Jean and Linda have been married since 2010. They are both UCBC alumni, Jean being one of the first UCBC students. They both currently serve as UCBC Theology Faculty members. As part of our Advanced Studies Program, Jean is preparing for his PhD defence in Biblical Studies at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies while Linda is completing her first year of PhD in Intercultural Studies at Biola University.



Emily Hamilton is deeply passionate about the work of Congo Initiative. She and her husband lived in Congo from 2015-2017 where Emily worked as a theology lecturer and counseling program coordinator with CI. Emily now lives in Edina, MN where she serves as the Pastor of Missions at Christ Presbyterian Church.



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.



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.