Advent Reflections

CONGO INITIATIVE

First Sunday of Advent: Hope

Faith That Leads to Hope
by Dr. Honoré Bunduki Kwany

Faith, mighty faith the promise sees and shouts it shall be done:
Looks at impossibilities and shouts it shall be done:
And shouts it shall be done, and shouts it shall be done:
Looks at impossibilities and shouts it shall be done.

These are lyrics of an old song sung by past missionaries as they remembered the early days when they were up to serve in unknown places. As we end 2024 and near entering 2025, these lyrics are also a call to us to look up to God, turn to the impossibilities, and shout in full hope, "It shall be done!" "Now, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see", a rare ingredient for which ancients were commended. And hope is that steadfast confidence that what was promised will come to pass, sometimes against all odds.

On October 5th, 2024, the Christian Bilingual University of the Congo reached the milestone of 1000+ graduates, an act that not only set the stage for the celebration of God's faithfulness but also cast hope for the future knowing that a mere dream can turn into reality if there is faith. And, where there is faith, there is hope. In the Holy Scriptures, God says, "The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the Lord; in its time, I will do this swiftly." This passage served as the key reading for the Christian Bilingual University of the Congo's milestone celebration. It presents three truths, that I suggest, speak into our lives in this advent season as members of the body of Christ: (1) we belong to a faithful God who is able to take the least to become a thousand, (2) a promise for us to claim, the smallest will become a mighty nation, (3) and the foundation for our hope, the unchanging and Almighty God.

From the least to a thousand: you belong to a faithful God.

Sometimes life is harsh on us through various entanglements: sickness, loss, suffering, oppression, lacking, discouragement, misunderstanding... In such times, it is easy to see oneself as the least, the forgotten, the worthless, the hopeless. Does that mean all is lost? Not at all, because the way we see ourselves is not the way God sees us. He clearly states it when he says "I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." It is, and will always be, God's desire to take us out of our misfortunes and give us another chance. In Isaiah 60:22, God is speaking to his people in deportation and under oppression. They have not been faithful to him but He still reminds them that it is possible, and He can make them, who seem to be the least, become a thousand. God is inviting them to consider having the chance to collect the broken pieces of their lives and dreams again and multiply them to be a thousand, a dreamt of situation that will amaze all nations. So much so true with our lives, God wants to bring wholeness to our lives for us to be witnesses of His grace so that others can see and follow. The question is, do I believe it is possible, and am I ready to follow with steadfast confidence?

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The smallest will become a mighty nation: a promise for you to claim.

God's promises are made to be claimed and should need be, sometimes he prompts us to doing it, as he did with Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" Our response to his prompting is what determines how and when he sets us on track for mighty things. All he expects from us is to hear his voice, respond in obedience, and let Him act as Abraham did : "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "so shall your offspring be." From an old man whose wife could, humanely speaking, hardly be capable to bear a child, Abraham became the Father of many nations, God's people. God's promises for us are in His Word, let's read and claim them and He will do it. How He will do it is none of your business because that belongs to the realm of faith. All he expects from us is that steadfast confidence.

I am the Lord; in its time, I will do this swiftly: foundation for our often shaky hope.

The God in whom we trust is Creator of all things and people. He is Omnipotent, Omniscient, Everlasting, and Loving. Of Him we are the offspring and it is His desire to bless his children. He longs to see us fully dependent on him, knowing that only He has the power to bring all scattered pieces of our lives and dreams together again. Personal efforts to do so lead to a dead end characterized by disillusionment and despair, the opposite of hope. But when we surrender to God and let Him do it with us and for us, He does it swiftly and perfectly.

Christmas 2024 should be a reminder that Christ came to live with us and to show us the way to the Father, swiftly entering the gloomy world on a silent, but bright and holy night, in a manger, a place nobody would ever think a King and Saviour would choose to lay. He chose to be born in very humbling conditions to identify with all and bring us peace and reason to hope in all conditions. Nobody is too bad to be excluded from his all-encompassing love and mercy, and nobody is good enough and self-righteous to deserve the peace he brings with him. In this advent season, may Christ grant us the grace to humbly accept Him, believe in Him, obey Him and closely follow Him to regain hope and see all our scattered pieces brought back together again. May He also allow us to see the mighty things the child born King and on whose shoulders the government sits has in store for us as we close 2024 and welcome 2025. He is the Lord, in its time, may He do this swiftly!

Merry Christmas!

Second Sunday of Advent: Peace

“My peace I give to you; not as the world gives”
by Jolie Sifa Kpaka

This season is a great reminder to receive the peace from God and not from this world as Jesus says in John 14:27:

“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.”

Clearly, the Jesus was stating that the peace He gave His followers was different from the peace they could find in the world. When Jesus referred to “the world,” He was speaking of the society and culture in which we humans live. He told them because they were His followers, they’d have trouble in this world. In fact, He claimed that some of them would be persecuted because they were His disciples. But in spite of this, He promised He’d never leave those who followed Him, and His constant presence would be the means whereby they could experience His peace.

As we journey through the season of Advent, we anticipate the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. The peace that Christ offers, as described in John 14:27, is unlike anything the world can provide. It is not the fleeting peace of calm circumstances or the absence of conflict, but rather a profound, soul-deep assurance that, no matter what happens around us, we are held by God's love.

Jesus speaks these words to His disciples in a moment of uncertainty and fear. Knowing that He would soon depart, He promises them a peace that transcends understanding. The world offers temporary solutions to ease anxiety—comforts, distractions, or superficial assurances—but Christ offers peace that stills our hearts in the face of fear and turmoil.

During Advent, we are reminded that peace is not just the absence of noise or trouble, but the presence of God with us—Emmanuel. As we light the candle of peace, we pause to consider how we can invite Christ’s peace into our hearts, homes, and communities. Amid the hustle and busyness of this season, Jesus invites us to rest in His peace, letting go of our fears and trusting in His sovereignty.

Because God is with us, we don’t have to give in to, sink beneath, or become defeated by our troubles. We can face, confront, challenge, deal, and in the end overcome them in the power of the cross. Jesus taught His followers that all troubles are passing in nature for a season … and a reason. So “let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:27). Hold on to the peace that God gives, confident that He’s watching, directing, and caring for those who trust and believe in Him (James 4:7).

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When fears, anxieties, and troubles arise in your life, look for the following signs of God's peace as it:

- *Transcends circumstances.* Often, peace is more readily seen and felt in the midst of trial and trouble. But regardless of what you're experiencing, know this: God is your peace. Put your faith in Him.
- *Surpasses understanding*. The peace of God is not something we can always figure out. But it's operative and available to us—far beyond our ability to understand it.
- *Extends to all His followers*. God's peace is extended to every person who accepts Jesus as their Savior, turns from their sin, and pursues a life in obedience to the guidance of God's Word and the Holy Spirit.
- *Is an abiding state of being*. In the difficult circumstances of life, the Holy Spirit is present to help. Peace—deep, genuine, God-given peace—can be the "norm" in which you live day to day.

As you move forward in the journey of life, trust and believe that God's desire for you is to feel an abiding peace at all times—a peace that includes joy and a feeling of purpose in every area of your life.

Application:

- Personal Peace: What worries or fears do you carry with you during this Advent season? Jesus invites you to exchange those burdens for His peace. Take time to pray, surrendering your anxieties to Him and asking for His peace to fill your heart.
- Peace in Relationships: Consider how you can be a peacemaker in your relationships. Is there a conversation that needs to be had or forgiveness that needs to be extended? Jesus calls us to be instruments of His peace.
- Global Peace: Advent reminds us that we are waiting for Christ's return when He will bring ultimate peace to the world. Pray for areas in the world that are in need of peace and justice, and ask God how you can be a part of His peace-bringing mission.

Let's Pray:

Prince of Peace, we thank You for the gift of Your perfect peace. In this season, calm our anxious hearts and help us trust in You. Teach us to be bearers of Your peace to those around us. We look forward to the day when You will bring true peace to our world. Until then, fill us with Your Spirit, that we may live as Your people of peace. Amen!

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

by Charlene Han Powell

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

As we inch closer and closer to Bethlehem, our liturgical calendars tell us that the 3rd Sunday of Advent is one of joy. Not happiness. Not bliss. But joy. Why is that important?

In this consumer-driven world that we live in, so often we are told that the goal of our existence is to pursue a life of happiness or to find our bliss. In big ways and small ways, we spend so much of our lives trying to attain these seemingly beautiful emotions.

And yet joy is utterly different. Joy is not something we chase after. No, joy finds us.

In the words of poet Donna Ashworth, "Joy does not arrive with a fanfare on a red carpet strewn with flowers of a perfect life… joy cares nothing for your messy home or your bank-balance, or your waistline, you see… joy is supposed to slither through the cracks of your imperfect life… that's how joy works… you cannot truly invite her… you can only be ready when she appears and hug her with meaning because in this very moment… **joy chose you.**"

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I think Mary would agree. I would bet that the last thing Mary was expecting out of life was a visit from an angel telling her that she was about to bear the Son of the Most High. Nothing about her or her circumstance would have pointed to her as the obvious candidate of such a high honor.

And yet joy chose her. Not in the way she wanted or would have expected, but it found her nonetheless. The best thing that Mary did was be open and present enough to receive it.

My hope and prayer for you this Advent is to be like Mary. In the midst of the incessant pursuit of happiness, in the face of a world facing unending hardship, my hope is not simply that joy will choose you, but that you will be ready and willing to receive it when it does.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

by Emma Smith Cain

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."
Luke 1:46-49

Mary's Magnificat, found in Luke 1:45-66, has always been one of my very favorite parts of Scripture, and this year, it makes up one of the four lectionary readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent, which is focused on the theme of love. I find Mary's Magnificat to be such a poignant reminder of God's faithfulness, justice, mercy, and above all else: God's love, which sees us, calls us, and transforms us.

Love That Sees

Mary begins her song by magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in His salvation. She marvels that God has seen her, a young, humble woman from Nazareth. She sings, "He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant" (Luke 1:48). Her acknowledgment reminds us of the deeply personal nature of God's love. God sees the whole of each of us, not just the parts that we carefully curate for others, but also the deepest parts of who we are. During Advent, we are reminded that the love of God does not depend on our status, our citizenship, or our achievement. Just as God chose Mary to carry Jesus, God's love reaches us each where we are.

Love That Calls

God's love does not just see us, but it also calls us to respond in love. Mary's Magnificat celebrates how God works through the humble and faithful to accomplish His will. In calling Mary to bear His Son, God invited her into His redemptive plan. Despite the uncertainty and potential risks, Mary embraced this calling with hope, peace, and joy. As we journey through this Advent season, let us remind ourselves that there is a Divine Love that calls each of us to respond. Like Mary, we are invited to participate in God's work in the world. Whether through the sharing of our resources, of resistance against structures that oppress others, or through service to others, our response to God's love shines God's light in the darkness. When we feel inadequate, Mary's story assures us that God equips those He calls. God's love strengthens and sustains us for the tasks that God asks us to carry out with love.

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Love That Transforms

The second half of Mary's song shifts its focus to the broader implications of God's love. She proclaims a vision of justice, where the proud are scattered, the mighty are brought low, and the humble are exalted. The hungry are filled with good things, and the rich are sent away empty. What a beautiful vision! This is the transformative power of God's love—a love that upends our corrupt worldly systems and brings hope to the oppressed. Through Jesus, this vision becomes reality. His life, death, and resurrection reveal an "upside down kingdom" built not on the values of this world, but on the values of a God of love, mercy, and justice. Advent—and Mary's Magnificat—invite us to consider how we can reflect this Divine Love. How might we each root ourselves in the God of Love (Ephesians 3:17) and reflect that love for others as we journey into the year ahead?

In love,
Emma

Christmas

by Justin Hubbard

"Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."
Luke 2:10

Joy found my family early in the year as we welcomed our second child. Our world, in that immediate moment, was soaked with everlasting joy and love. But time goes by, the world continues to spin - sometimes seemingly out of control and on fire. At least, that is how it has felt this year. Though joy continues to find us, we also find ourselves confronting the fears and fragility of life – particularly as we or loved ones experience loss, or we read and witness the various forms of violence and injustice happening in our own communities and around the world.

Yet, this is where Jesus enters. This is where the Christmas message begins. Historically, we find Jesus born into the world, in a manger, to displaced parents who would later flee as refugees. Their hearts filled with joy, yet, undoubtedly, concerned about the events happening around them - the possibility of confronting religious and political authority. The possibility of facing those who would react with violence.

Yet, Mary embraced the moment. She embraced life. Mary treasured the words and prophecies shared by shepherds and kings (Luke 2:18–19). She "pondered" them - I imagine both with worry of their implication for her son but also the good news it brings for all people. Here, we witness a Mary who clung to the angel's words, "do not be afraid." Here, we watch those around the manger, to see what they saw - the good news against a backdrop of dark times.

In our own lives, we also look to each other - to our communities of friends, our communities in Christ, and others, to teach and inspire us to cling to the words of the angel. Those who can see when we struggle to see.

In October, when I traveled to Beni, DR Congo, I found myself inspired by our community there. Joy found us as we celebrated another graduation and a significant milestone, over 1,000 total graduates. And though it was easy to feel this overwhelming joy amidst celebrations and reunions, Congolese music and testimonies, what stood out to me was the acknowledgment that God is present. Amidst ongoing insecurity and conflict that has displaced and affected so many lives, God is here. God is with us. We received the good news together, in hope and affirmation that the God of love and peace enters our moments, our lives, our heartaches, and our celebrations, and says - "'do not be afraid' - I am the good news."

My prayer and hope for you, friends, is that this good news finds you and your loved ones this Christmas. Amidst any uncertainty and worry, may you cling to the words of the angel, and may you find strength and hope within your communities of faith. Wishing you peace and joy!

Contributors

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 December 2018. He demonstrates the expertise, skills, and leadership required to lead UCBC into this new season. While Dr. Kasali cast the vision for this unique university in eastern Congo, Dr. Bunduki played a crucial role in implementing its programs and structure. We are confident that UCBC will grow, prosper, and deepen its roots under Dr. Bunduki's leadership, maintaining the vision embodied in the university's motto: "Being transformed to transform."

Jolie is a project and program professional with experience in fostering healthy partnership relations and quality delivery of operations. She and her husband François Amisi are both UCBC Alumni from the Economics and Management department. She holds a double concentration Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Strategic Management and MBA in Project Management from Daystar University, Nairobi/Kenya. Currently based in Springfield, Missouri/U.S. where she is completing a STEM MBA from Missouri State University where she will earn a Data Analysis Certificate and an Information Technology Certificate to improve her skills in Management Decision Making through the use of Enterprise Resource Planning systems and Databases.

Charlene Han Powell is a second-generation Korean American, the beloved wife of her high school sweetheart, and the adoring mother of two daughters. Charlene is the Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Berkeley. As a pastor, her passion is helping people understand and articulate their faith in our diverse, multicultural, multifaith world. And it is one of the guideposts of her ministry at First Presbyterian Berkeley as together they live into their mission to "love…serve…and pursue God's restoring justice."

Emma Smith Cain joined the board for Congo Initiative - US in January 2024. In her professional life, she currently serves as the Associate Director of International Programs at Mennonite Central Committee. In that role, she gives leadership to the work of MCC in 45 countries globally. Previously, she served with World Vision International and Samaritan's Purse, both in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She is also currently pursuing a PhD in Organizational Leadership at Eastern University. Emma is a triple citizen of New Zealand, the USA, and the Osage Nation – a resilient Native American tribe based in northeastern Oklahoma. She brings all these identities to her work and research daily and is passionate about supporting faith-based organizations to challenge the power imbalances baked into the humanitarian system.

Justin Hubbard first became involved with Congo Initiative in 2007, when he was invited to help implement CI's flagship institution, UCBC. Each year he has grown more passionate about CI as he witnessed its impact. Having held various roles within the organization, Justin currently serves as the Executive Director of Congo Initiative USA. Justin is dedicated to ensuring the sustainability and scalability of CI, believing that it serves as a beacon of hope and a leader in developing changemakers to ignite systemic change in Congo.