



Holding
Children
in Prayer

AN ADVENT GUIDE

About the Children's Defense Fund

The Children's Defense Fund's Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start*, and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

CDF provides a strong, effective voice for *all* the children of America who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor and minority children and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick or into trouble, drop out of school, or suffer family breakdown.

CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by foundation and corporate grants and individual donations. We have never taken government funds.

For more than 30 years, CDF has worked in partnership with the religious community to respond to the needs of poor and neglected children through worship, direct service, public education, community outreach, and advocacy. The CDF-coordinated National Observance of Children's Sabbaths® celebration, observed every October, offers all people of faith the opportunity to renew their commitment to children annually. The annual Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry, held at CDF Haley Farm in Tennessee each July, offers spiritual renewal, networking, and continuing education for religious leaders and other faith-based child advocates. Contact CDF's Religious Action Division at (202) 662-3579 for more information.

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AN ADVENT GUIDE

By Shannon Daley-Harris



Children's Defense Fund

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Holding Children in Prayer

An Advent Guide

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Preface

by *Marian Wright Edelman*

A friend who shared this story described it as “the best sermon” my dear friend and mentor Bill Coffin (Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr.) “never preached.” It was Christmas Eve and the pews at New York City’s Riverside Church were packed. The Christmas pageant was underway and had come to the point at which the innkeeper was to turn away Mary and Joseph with the resounding line, “There’s no room at the inn!”

Never mind that no figure of the innkeeper actually appears in scripture. We’ve all imagined him delivering the message of no room, of inhospitality to the baby Jesus and His parents. And it seemed the perfect part for Tim, an earnest youth of the congregation who has Down Syndrome. Only one line to remember: “There’s no room at the inn!” He had practiced it again and again with his parents and with the pageant director. He seemed to have mastered it.

So there he stood at the altar of the sanctuary, bathrobe costume firmly belted over his broad stomach, as Mary and Joseph made their way down the center aisle. They approached him, said their lines as rehearsed, and waited for his reply. Tim’s parents, the pageant director, and the whole congregation almost leaned forward as if willing him to remember his line.

“There’s no room at the inn!” Tim boomed out, just as rehearsed. But then, as Mary and Joseph turned on cue to travel further, Tim suddenly yelled “Wait!” They turned back, startled, and looked at him in surprise.

“You can stay at my house!” he called.

Well, Tim had effectively preached the sermon at Riverside Church that Christmas Eve. Bill Coffin strode to the pulpit, said “Amen,” and sat down. It was the best sermon he never preached.

When, oh when will we individually and collectively as congregations, as communities, and as a nation stop saying to our children, “There’s no room at the inn”? When will we, like Tim, start saying, “You can stay at my

house”? When will we say to poor, hungry, and homeless children, “Wait! We’ll make a place for you at America’s table of plenty”? When will we say to sick and uninsured children, “We won’t turn you away from the doctor”? How long until we say to children whose parents are working hard every day trying to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads but are still poor, “We will help you escape poverty”? When will we say to the more than six million children who are home alone or on the streets after school, “We’ll make a safe place for you with caring adults in after-school programs”? When will we say to the child of working parents laid off because of the economic downturn who can’t pay the rent and afford enough food, “We’ll catch you in our safety net until your family is able to provide for you again”? When will we say to the millions of children whose parents need affordable, quality child care that there is room enough in a Head Start or child care center in their community?

It’s time to bring the baby out of the barn and into America’s inn. In Mark 9:37, Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” In this holy season, we Christians celebrate the miracle of the incarnation—our belief that God actually came to live among us as a child—a child who cried and laughed, who loved and learned, who was born as a vulnerable baby needing us and who died as a Savior whom we all need. How do we recognize the Christ child in every child today—especially those who are poor?

I hope we can recognize and honor the Christ child today by reaching out and sharing our personal gifts of time and money and service with the needy. But I also hope we can honor Him by raising a mighty voice for justice and protection for all the children left behind in poverty and hopelessness. Jesus Christ challenged the cultural and political priorities of His time and stood up for the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable. So must we today at a time when America’s values are under attack by terrorists from without and by neglect from within. In this holy season, let us repent and reaffirm our commitment to building a nation where all children find room in our inn.

- O God, forgive our rich nation where small babies
die of cold quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation where small children
suffer from hunger quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation where toddlers and
school children die from guns sold quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation that lets children be
the poorest group of citizens quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation that lets the rich
continue to get more at the expense of the poor
quite legally.
- O God, forgive our rich nation that thinks security
rests in missiles rather than in mothers, and
in bombs rather than in babies.
- O God, forgive our rich nation for not giving You
sufficient thanks by giving to others their
daily bread.
- O God, help us never to confuse what is quite legal
with what is just and right in Your sight.

Let us determine to do what is just and right in God's sight for all the children in America and the world. I hope this Advent Guide will help us prepare our spirits for the work ahead.

In faith and hope,



Marian Wright Edelman

A Note About This Advent Devotional

Each week is organized around an advent theme—peace, hope, joy, and love—and a related children’s concern—violence, poverty, hunger, and the need for child care.

Each day, you are invited to light an advent candle symbolizing peace, hope, joy, or love, and say an accompanying prayer. If you have an advent wreath, terrific. If not, you may simply light a candle or candles.

Each day offers a reading. The Sunday devotions introduce an advent hymn to be that day’s reading rather than a scripture passage. You may wish to read it silently or aloud, or even to sing it. A portion of the scripture reading is printed in the devotional. However, you are encouraged to read the full passage cited in your own Bible. All scripture passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

A reflection considering how God’s word revealed in scripture speaks to the themes and a closing prayer follow.

Finally, each devotional includes an “Act in Faith.” These are suggestions of ways that you may act faithfully in response to the reading, reflection, and prayer in which you have just engaged.

First Sunday in Advent

Peace: A Safe Start for Every Child

Lighting the Advent Candle

As you light the first advent candle of peace: “May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Hymn: Comfort, Comfort You, My People

Comfort, comfort you my people,
Tell of peace, thus says our God.
Comfort those who sit in darkness
Bowed beneath oppression’s load.
Speak you to Jerusalem
Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell them that their sins I cover,
And their warfare now is over.

For the herald’s voice is calling
In the desert far and near,
Bidding us to make repentance
Since the kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way.
Let the valleys rise in meeting
And the hills bow down in greeting.

Make you straight what long was crooked,
Make the rougher places plain;
Let your hearts be true and humble,
As befits God’s holy reign.
For the glory of the Lord
Now o’er earth is shed abroad;
And all flesh shall see the token
That God’s word is never broken.

Reflection

The teenagers at the small church in the working class neighborhood outside the city had been given responsibility for planning the Christmas pageant. How hard could it be to assign angel parts to the littlest kids, shepherds to the elementary aged kids, and decide which of the high school students would be wise men and which would play Joseph, Mary, and the angel Gabriel? So imagine the congregation's surprise on that Christmas eve as the pageant was drawing to a close. The angels had fluttered and the shepherds had quaked as expected, the baby doll Jesus had been placed in the manger on cue. Then the three wise men—lanky Tyrone, sweet Tyesha, and thoughtful Jerome—began walking down the aisle toward the baby Jesus. But what were they carrying in their arms as the gifts for the Christ child? The congregation peered in the dimly lit sanctuary, as the teens exchanged silent glances, nods of assurance to each other about the decision they had made in their pageant planning discussions. For the teens carried in their arms replicas of the weapons that brought such fear and violence to their schools and neighborhoods. And they lay them at the manger of the baby Jesus. What better gift to bring to this babe, this Prince of Peace, than the commitment to lay down the weapons that were killing their friends, school mates, family members? What better gift, indeed.

That holy night, the congregation joined in song as the teens lit candles and passed their light to those sitting in the pews, "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright, 'round yon virgin mother and child!" As the youths and congregation continued, the words became a collective prayer, "Holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace."

This advent season, let that also be our prayer. That every infant, child, and teen may know peace and safety through the night and throughout their days. Every child should have a Safe Start. To make it so, we must join with the teens in finding ways to lay down all weapons at the feet of the Prince of Peace. The clenched fists, belts, irons, and other implements used to abuse a child—abuse is confirmed every 35 seconds in our nation. The guns that take the life of a child in America every three hours. The weapon of prejudice against people of other races, religions, income groups, and circumstances that wounds the hearts, minds, and bodies of our children.

Comfort, comfort you my people, tell of peace, thus says our God.

Prayer

Tender God, grant me your peace in this advent season. Calm my anxious thoughts, soothe my heart when troubled. Help me to bear your peace into the world, working for the safety and protection of children and all who are vulnerable. Amen.

Act in Faith

Protecting children is everybody's business. If you have Internet access, read about what you can do as an individual, organization, or business to help protect children. Log on to www.childrensdefense.org/childwelfare/abuse/default.aspx. (Your local library may offer Internet access if you do not have it at home or at work.) Or make a special offering to your church or denomination for peacemaking or youth programs.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 2:1-3

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:1-3)

Reflection

“I have a dream,” proclaimed another prophetic voice. Like Isaiah, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also witnessed the failings of a nation to live in justice and righteousness. And yet, like Isaiah, Dr. King could see beyond the judgment to a more glorious vision of peace, a time when children were cherished and protected and people of every race and nation were welcomed.

Still today, we live with the juxtaposition of our world with its failings and God’s glorious plan. Still, children are not protected; each and every day in our nation, 2,455 children are confirmed as abused and neglected, and gunfire takes the lives of eight children every day. In this Advent season, we still await the coming of the Prince of Peace. Let us make our hearts, family, communities, and nation ready to receive him—through prayer, service, and speaking out for justice.

What is your dream for our children?

Prayer

Prince of Peace, come into my heart and lead me in the ways of peace. Help me to share your peace, your welcome, with others. Amen.

Act in Faith

Make a donation to UNICEF, the United Nation’s Children’s Fund, which works for the safety and well-being of children around the globe. Or connect with national or state organizations working to end gun violence. Log on to www.childrensdefense.org/education/gunviolence/other.aspx.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 2:4

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)

Reflection

The Capital Children’s Museum in Washington, D.C., featured a most unusual structure. Entombed in a sculpture were countless toy guns, knives, swords, and other violence-oriented toys, brought by children who no longer see violence—pretended or real—as fun. Above these violent toys—which have been smashed and broken—were peaceful toys... puzzles, crayons, kites, and a stuffed lion and lamb perched atop a globe ball. At the base of the structure is a box into which children have dropped letters expressing their hopes for and commitment to peace. Truly, these children have the spirit of peace and are turning swords into plowshares.

What a solemn contrast to the tragic account of the father who, in response to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, bought a gun, loaded it, and hung it from a curtain rod above his small son’s bed. To keep his family safe, he thought. Yet only a few days passed before the worst happened. The killer that took his child’s life was no terrorist from abroad but the gun in his home, grasped and accidentally fired by his inquisitive child.

How can we transform forces of harm into forces for healing in this Advent season and the year to come? How can we learn the lessons of peace-making rather than war-waging even—especially—during this turbulent, troubled time?

Prayer

God of possibility, help me to work for healing and peace—in my heart; in my home; in my community, nation, and world. Amen.

Act in Faith

Discuss Christmas gift lists with the children in your life. Talk about why violence-oriented toys and media are contrary to the spirit of Christ and the good of our communities, nation, and world. Or contact your local television station and share your concern about the marketing of violence to children.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Psalm 122

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.” For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.” For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. (Psalm 122:6-9)

Reflection

The Rev. Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, tells of being attacked from behind and knocked down one day by several would-be muggers, boys who appeared to be middle-school-aged. He sprang to his feet and said something like, “I’m a pastor, do you really want to take on a pastor?” His attackers were speechless. . . and so with the heart of a pastor Jim started to preach, telling the boys that they all had to work together to make the city a better place and to end the violence. Finally, utterly taken aback, the boys ran. But one stopped mid-way down the block, turned back with a wistful look, and called out “Pastor, will you pray for me?”

In our day, praying for peace may well mean praying for the most troubled children and the most divided and violent neighborhoods. Praying for those we fear, those who would hurt us. It means putting our prayers into action to help children who are being drawn into violence and wrong-doing, by volunteering, speaking out, changing policies, and creating safe havens and positive alternatives. We can make our cities and our children safe. And doing so will indeed be for the good of our family, friends, and life as a faith community.

Prayer

God of mercy, I pray this day for those who hurt as well as those who are hurt, for those who kill as well as those who are killed. Help me to stop the cycle of violence, address its underlying causes, and work for peace with justice. Amen.

Act in Faith

As you prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace, commit to praying daily for children, especially for troubled young people.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Romans 13:11-14

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 put aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.... (Romans 13:11-12)

Reflection

Time is a tricky concept for children to master. Three-year-old Micah keeps working at it, but always seems to get things turned around. Looking at the digital clock on the stove shortly before nine one morning, he announced, “It’s eight minutes after forty-four o’clock!” After a mid-day nap, he’s never quite clear that it is still the same day. And the passage of years is agonizingly slow. Thinking of the magic age when he’s been told he may sleep on the top bunk, he asks “When will I be six enough for the top bunk?”

Advent is also about time—traditionally about waiting. How long until Christmas? How many more days of Advent hymns until we can break out the Christmas carols? How many more days for shopping, cleaning, cooking, and—yes—preparing our hearts for Christ’s coming? How much longer?

Today’s reading, however, is not about waiting. It’s time! Now is the moment. This is your wake-up call! The language of waking from sleep in scripture suggests a summons to moral action. This is indeed the moment to wake from sleep and devote our energies and our being to caring for and protecting children as God would have us. When we take action to protect children—calling for policy changes, establishing after-school programs, urging increased funding for youth development initiatives—some may try to put us off, saying it is not the right time, be patient, wait. But know in your heart that now is the moment and be not deterred.

Prayer

O God, rouse me that your Spirit may burn within me and strengthen my actions this and every day. Amen.

Act in Faith

More than six million children are left alone without supervision after school each day. If you are home during the weekday, offer your name and number to the parents of unsupervised children so that their children may turn to you if something unexpected arises. Volunteer to help in an after-school program.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Romans 13:11-14

Let us then put aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...
(Romans 13:12)

Reflection

That night of the party, the 12-year-old faced a moment of decision. Her best friends from childhood were trying on adult-sized behaviors—drinking, smoking, and increasing levels of sexual involvement. It seemed that the only way to maintain the friendships was to do likewise. But somehow that night, she decided to turn her back on the behaviors and even, if necessary, the friends. How did she come to that decision and stick to it, despite lonely times and the teasing that ensued?

Who and what helped her put on the armor of light? A family that loved and affirmed her and had high expectations and good communication. Adult church members who took special interest in her and forged intergenerational friendships. A church youth group that affirmed a different set of values. Piano playing. “Assets” like those the Search Institute has identified and grouped under support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Parents, teachers, and community members all have roles to play in providing these assets. Children with many such assets are likely to avoid risky behaviors; those without the assets tend to get into trouble.

This day, let us commit to helping more children put on the armor of light—the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. And let us help them put, as shoes on their feet, whatever will make them ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. (Ephesians 6:14-17)

Prayer

Strong and sure God, help me to discard the trappings of pride, self-concern, and superficial ways, and put on the armor of your light. Show me how to help our children also put on your armor of light. Amen.

Act in Faith

Make a donation to or consider volunteering with a youth mentoring program such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America. Or forge a special friendship with a youth in your church or neighborhood.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May the light of God’s peace shine forth amid the violence of our nation and world. Come, O Prince of Peace, come into our hearts and land. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
(Matt. 24:42)

Reflection

Christmas is three weeks away. For many of us, that knowledge determines what we will do in the coming days. That means just so many days until guests come to stay and so preparations must be made. That means dwindling shopping days, and presents need to be wrapped. That means only three more Sundays of Christmas pageant rehearsals.

Our reading today, however, reminds us that we cannot know when the Lord is coming. While we don’t know when, we do know what it is we are to be doing in the meantime. We are to be fulfilling the law of love and doing works of justice and mercy.

Today’s scripture passage comes in the midst of a chapter in which Jesus is teaching his disciples about the end of the age. Jesus continues teaching them, in the following chapter, about the coming of the kingdom. The chapter concludes with Jesus’ well-known description of the Last Judgment. How will the nations be judged when he comes again? By whether we gave food to the hungry, something to drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, visited the imprisoned. For in so doing, Jesus taught, we will have done so to him. (Matt. 25: 31-46) He is waiting—as millions of poor children in our nation wait—to see what we will do now.

Prayer

Almighty God, in this season of preparation remind me how to truly prepare for your coming again. Guide me to care for you by caring for children in need. Amen.

Act in Faith

Look at your calendar for the remainder of Advent. Schedule times to render a service to children and families in need. Consider the actions Jesus describes in Matt. 25 and choose one to do. For example, take canned goods to a food pantry, volunteer at a soup kitchen, or donate warm clothes to an organization serving poor children.

Second Sunday in Advent

Hope: A Fair Start for Every Child

Lighting the Advent Candle

As you light the second Advent candle of hope, along with the first candle of peace: “May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Hymn: Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.
Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Reflection

Ray is a round-faced boy of 10 who seldom smiles. Until a year ago, he and his mother, Jenny, lived in an apartment in San Jose, California. When Jenny, a self-employed auto mechanic, became disabled and was unable to pay the rent, Jenny and Ray were evicted. “We had to sleep by the freeway in the bushes,” Ray explains solemnly. “We had a tent.”

Now Ray and Jenny live in a shelter for homeless families. When he is asked about his hopes for the future, Ray says he would like to stay in one place and have a friend to play with. He ends his response by saying, “...if I ever get there.”

“What do you mean?” he is asked.

“Like I say,” Ray says in a flat voice, “tomorrow may never come.”

Every day at least 200,000 children wake up homeless. Some pass through homeless shelters each year while others' families move from home to home, one step ahead of eviction, or put their well-being at risk by foregoing food, health care, child care, and other basic necessities in order to pay rent.

Low-income families like Ray and his mom face serious difficulties finding affordable housing. Even if his mom earned the minimum wage, she would not have been able to afford the "fair market rent" for a home anywhere in the United States. The supply of affordable, low-rent housing continues to decline, and waiting lists for subsidized housing vouchers continue to grow if they have not already been cut off. About 2.3 million households with children live in substandard housing, with more than 700,000 of them living in severely substandard housing.

Two thousand years ago, another struggling family had no home and was, like Ray and his mother, forced into the most make-shift, unthinkable circumstances for a child.

Stable. Manger. Animals. But that one, that holy child born that long ago night, came to bring hope to those like Ray who are hopeless. To bring good news to the poor.

Emmanuel. God with us. God has been in the stable. God has been in the tent by the freeway and in the homeless shelter. Will we see God there? Will we reach out to the children like Ray and care for them as if they were the Christ child? Will we speak out for them and join in bringing good news to the nearly 13 million children who are poor and the millions in substandard housing or shelters?

Prayer

God, open my eyes that I may see you in all poor children, open my mind that I may value and not judge, open my heart that I may love and not ignore your beloved children. Amen.

Act in Faith

Learn more about children in poverty. If you have Internet access, visit www.childrensdefense.org/familyincome/childpoverty/default.aspx. To learn more first-hand and better understand the impact of poverty, arrange a visit to a homeless shelter for families.

Advent Candle Lighting

“May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-5

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor; and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. (Isaiah 11:3b-4a)

Reflection

“It’s hard to tighten your belt when you are wearing diapers,” reads the text of a Children’s Defense Fund poster depicting a baby in Pampers. And yet somehow our national policy has seemed to expect that of children. We as a nation have become so self-righteous about “personal responsibility,” so zealous in distinguishing between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, that we have somehow forgotten that no child is “undeserving”—no child deserves poverty and all of its cruel companions: hunger, preventable illness and disabilities, even death.

Isaiah’s vision of a spirit-filled leader reminds us that such leaders will not discriminate by what they see or hear. Righteous and just leaders, inspired leaders, will side with those who are poor and secure justice for the down-trodden. They will stand up for the children and they will stand up to those who oppress the vulnerable and put a stop to it.

What would Isaiah make of the United States, the richest nation on earth, which allows children to be the poorest group of citizens? What would he conclude if told about the growing gap between rich and poor, in which the wealthiest one-fifth of households made 15 times more in median income than the poorest one-fifth in 2004? How would Isaiah judge our budget—a document expressing our collective values and priorities in practical terms? Whom would Isaiah say the government should help?

Then imagine—just imagine leaders like the one Isaiah described making decisions on behalf of the children, the poor, the meek in our nation. What a difference it would make. Imagine expecting, demanding that kind of leadership from state and federal officials. Imagine how our communities and nation would look. Now imagine yourself as that kind of leader. Being that kind of leader in the P.T.A., the office, the church, the community.

We don't have to just imagine. That is the extraordinary miracle of the incarnation. Jesus showed us what such leadership would look like. What it looks like when one welcomes the outcast and blesses the children, lifts up the poor and feeds the hungry. Now go and do likewise.

Prayer

Almighty God, in Jesus you have shown me how to live and how to lead. Strengthen me to do so and to call for just leadership from others. Amen.

Act in Faith

Refer to the Children's Defense Fund Action Council's Nonpartisan Congressional Voting Record to see how your elected representatives have voted on legislation affecting children (available at www.childrensdefense.org, by clicking on "CDF Action Council," and then "Congressional Scorecard"). Then write a letter to your Senators and Representative either praising or urging their leadership on behalf of children and the poor.

Advent Candle Lighting

“May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

Reflection

The exhausted mother slumped into a tot-sized chair at the end of the church school session she had taught. “Trying to teach a room full of three-year-olds is like herding cats!” she exclaimed.

All too often, we adults are so occupied with trying to lead—or herd!—our children that we almost miss learning from them, being guided by their leadership, being inspired by their vision. Just ask Connor’s mom or the adults on the school board of David’s school.

“I’m starting a peace club,” six-year-old Connor had announced to his mom one day after school. “There’s too much hitting and teasing at school, and I’m going to tell any kid who wants to be in my club that they have to promise not to hit or tease other kids.”

Eleven-year-old David Levitt noticed lots of food being thrown away in the school cafeteria. He asked the school board if he could gather the left-over food to give to hungry people. The school board agreed, and David began an organization called “Food for Thought.”

And a little child shall lead them.

Prayer

Gracious God, help me to take the time to listen to children and learn from their leadership. Amen.

Act in Faith

Ask a child what she or he thinks should be done to help children and families that don’t have enough money for food, medicine, and other things they need. Then follow their lead and put one of their ideas into action. Or have your child write (or dictate, for younger children) a letter to their members of Congress or their governor, telling what they think should be done to help poor families.

Advent Candle Lighting

“May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. (Psalm 72:1-4)

For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. (Psalm 72:12-14)

Reflection

The psalmist set forth a vision of just leadership, perhaps for the king's coronation or its annual commemoration. Can you imagine if this psalm were read to mark the beginning of a President's or Senator's term? If it were read to them each year, reminding them of their responsibility to provide leadership that protects and provides for people who are poor? What if the psalm were read to corporate CEO's on their first day on the job, or school superintendents, or pastors, or civic club presidents? What if every hospital president, health insurance company president, and doctor heard this psalm before beginning their work? What if each of us read this psalm annually to guide our own life and work. How would it change you?

Just imagine if the hallmark of a presidency were justice, if it were measured in deliverance of the poor and needy, the elimination of oppression and violence from their lives. What if the State of the Union reported on the success of the presidency and the well-being of our nation by this measure? How are we doing? A full 13 million children in our nation are living in poverty. How strong is the state of our union?

Prayer

God of justice and mercy, help me to lead each day in ways that serve people who are poor, and strengthen me to call for such leadership from others. Amen.

Act in Faith

Send a copy of Psalm 72 to the President or another leader who you would like to encourage in just leadership. Add a note reminding them of their responsibility to protect children and urging them to measure their leadership by whether any child is left behind.

Advent Candle Lighting

“May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Romans 15:4-13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Reflection

When have you been discouraged? When has your hope ebbed while despair threatened to overwhelm you?

Three out of every four poor children live in families where someone works. The parents who are working hard yet remain in poverty surely know discouragement. Those advocates who've been working to end child poverty also know crushed hopes and wearying defeats.

At a 1967 Christmas Eve service at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reflected on the crushing disappointments, “deferred dreams,” and “blasted hopes” he had experienced. And yet, he preached, “... I still have a dream. Because, you know, you can't give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving. You lose that courage to be... As we continue to hope for peace on earth and goodwill to all, let us know that in the process we have cosmic companionship.

“And so today I still have a dream. People will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers and sisters. I still have a dream today that one day every person of color in the world will be judged on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin; and everyone will respect the dignity and worth of human personality; and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but the first order of business on every legislative agenda.”

Do you still have a dream? Let the God of hope fill and sustain you this season.

Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Breathe into me a fiery passion for justice and unquenchable hope. Amen.

Act in Faith

Write a note to encourage someone in their service to advocate on behalf of children—a teacher, a legislator, a foster parent, a social worker, a grandparent raising grandchildren, or a child care provider.

Advent Candle Lighting

“May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Romans 15:4-13

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:5-7)

Reflection

Who's in and who's out, who is accepted and who is rejected, who is included and who is excluded? To a middle school student in the throes of peer group formation, the problem might feel new, but it is as old as scripture and as certain as the sun rising again tomorrow.

In today's scripture passage, Paul is trying to help the church in Rome understand that God is keeping the promise to the Jews, but that everyone, Gentiles too, is included in God's welcome. Everyone is welcome in God's embrace, at God's table.

If we look around us at church on Sunday, however, do we notice which races, ethnicities, income groups, ages, neighborhoods are represented and included? Can we imagine who is missing? What can we do as faith communities to make all feel welcome?

If we picture our national “table,” it is also clear who is welcomed and embraced and who is rejected or excluded. Just ask the nation's 13 million poor children. Or the 9 million children without health insurance who can't see a doctor when needed.

The Christ whom we await and celebrate in this season came for every child. Let us live together, welcoming each child, for the glory of God.

Prayer

Steadfast God, encourage me to welcome each child as you have welcomed me. Amen.

Act in Faith

Write a letter to your members of Congress asking them to ensure that every child has health insurance.

Advent Candle Lighting

“May the light of Christ bring hope into a world of poverty and need. Come, Christ child, to bring good news to children who are poor and all who wait in need. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11)

Reflection

John the Baptist proclaimed the need to repent. The Hebrew word for repent used in scripture means “to return” or to “turn around.” Repentance means far more than a feeling—it means a change of action. In short, as we prepare for Christ’s coming, we are to turn in a whole new direction, act in new ways.

In what ways do you feel you need to turn in a new direction? In family relationships? Finances? Priorities? A destructive habit or addiction? Self-care? Faith life? The blessing of our baptism is the recognition that, marked by God as God’s own, we have the continual opportunity to be washed clean, to be made new.

If we look at the child poverty in our nation, we recognize that our nation too needs to repent, to turn in a new direction. It can be done, it has been done. We reduced poverty among the elderly; from 25 percent of the elderly in 1968 to 9.7 percent in 1999. And now we must make a change in the poverty rate among children, the poorest group of American citizens. Will we repent? Will we turn our nation in a new direction and end child poverty by 2010?

Prayer

God of new beginnings, I thank you for the forgiveness and fresh start you bless me with each day. Hear now the things for which I repent this day. (Time for silent reflection.) Help me to turn in a new direction and guide me to urge our nation to turn in a new direction too, for the sake of your beloved children. Amen.

Act in Faith

Decide on an action you will take to move in a new direction. Then commit to an action that you will take to help eliminate child poverty.

Third Sunday in Advent

Joy: A Fair Start for Every Hungry Child

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the third advent candle of joy, along with the first candle of peace and the second candle of hope: “May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!
O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!
O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and discord cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

Reflection

Hungry child,
I didn’t make this world for you.
You didn’t buy any stock in my railroad.
You didn’t invest in my corporation.
Where are your shares of Standard Oil?
I made the world for the rich
And the will-be-rich
And the have-always-been-rich.
Not for you,
Hungry child.

Langston's Hughes stunning words capture the devastating conclusions our nation's millions of hungry children may come to as they feel the ache of hunger while the nation looks the other way. Understandably, they could conclude that God wants it this way. Why else would citizens and leaders in the world's wealthiest nation fail to act to end the scandal of childhood hunger?

But to understand God's will for hungry children they and we have a far more reliable guide than society's response. We have Jesus Christ, born as a poor child to disperse the clouds of night—of hunger, poverty, death, despair. We have Jesus Christ, who came to preach good news to the poor. We have Jesus Christ, who told his followers not to turn the children away but to bring them to him that they may be blessed. We have Jesus Christ, who looked with compassion on a hungry crowd—a crowd seemingly too large to feed, with too few resources. We have Jesus Christ who called upon the community's resources and fed them all as a sign of God's will.

The Reverend Joan Brown Campbell, past General Secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., tells of serving communion at a worship service in Cincinnati. She stood at the front of the church distributing the communion bread. A small girl approached her, hands outstretched. Reverend Campbell placed the bread in her tiny hands and said, "The body of Christ, broken for you."

The little girl looked up, eyes wide with wonder. "For me?" she asked, incredulously.

"Yes, sweetheart, for you," Reverend Campbell replied.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you. To you.

O hungry child, for you Christ was born—to know the world's pain as a poor and vulnerable child.

Hungry child, for you Christ came to preach good news to the poor.

Hungry child, for you Christ died, reconciling the world to God's self.

For you, sweetheart, for you. Don't let the world ever make you think otherwise.

Prayer

Gracious God, feed my hungry soul and fill the empty places. Then help me to feed the children who are hungry and respond to the needs of the children for whom you came into the world and for whom you died. Amen.

Act in Faith

Place a jar on your table. At every meal this week, after you give thanks for the food, place a donation in the jar. At the end of the week, give the accumulated money to an organization serving hungry children directly or advocating an end to child hunger and poverty.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 35:1-7

Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” (Isaiah 35:3-4)

Reflection

It was 1967 and Senator Robert Kennedy was on a visit arranged by Marian Wright to witness hunger in the Mississippi Delta. Entering a shack, he knelt beside a child with emaciated limbs and a bloated belly. Gently, tenderly, he sought to engage the child. To no avail. The child was too weak and listless from hunger to focus her gaze, to see the loving and concerned face of the Senator. Outraged at such hunger in rich America, Senator Kennedy returned to Washington, D.C., and set in motion efforts to expand child and family nutrition programs such as food stamps, mobilizing legislators, doctors, the media, and ordinary citizens. And childhood hunger was virtually eliminated—until policy choices in the eighties reversed that triumph of human compassion and action.

In our reading, God’s word comes to us not as suggestion but as an imperative, a command: strengthen, make firm, say, “Today, we are called to strengthen the children weak from hunger, to stand for the children who cannot stand alone. We are called to offer a word of hope, courage, and salvation: God is here with you right now. And God will not let injustice remain. Will we?”

Prayer

God, you are here and I give you thanks for your strong, sure presence. Help me to fulfill your command and strengthen and uphold those who are weak and fearful, especially the children. Amen.

Act in Faith

Call your school to find out how many children receive free or reduced price lunches (because of low family income). Then find out if children have access to the Summer Food Program during the summer months when school is out. If not, talk with school officials and community leaders about putting the Summer Food Program in place in your neighborhood to ensure that children don’t go hungry next summer. If you have a Freedom School in your community, this is also an excellent place for a Summer Food Program. (Learn about CDF Freedom SchoolsSM programs: Visit www.freedomschools.org)

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 35: 8-10

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isaiah 35:10)

Reflection

You can hear the sorrow and weary sighs of a hungry child in the voice of Cathy, a fifth-grader from New Mexico:

“Every night it’s the same old thing. We go to the church for dinner, walk home to our one-bedroom apartment, and go to bed for a night full of bad dreams. In the morning we walk around town looking for food in garbage cans. We find cereal boxes with a little cereal left in it and a rotten apple. At six o’clock we start walking to the church for our dinner. I made a poem that expresses my feelings about the way the day crawls by:

“Cereal and a rotten apple for breakfast
Nothing for lunch
A dinner at the Baptist church
And that’s the way my day goes by.”

But listen! The sighs are ceasing. Is that instead the sound of singing we now hear? “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, God who has brought us thus far on the way; Thou who hast by thy might led us into the light, keep us forever on the path we pray.” It is the song of restored community and joyful relationship with God.

In today’s reading, Israel returned as a restored community in which members cared for and protected each other. They reconciled with God and had a fresh chance to live out God’s love and justice.

What song will we sing? Will we join the joyful song of a faithful community that puts children’s sighs and sorrows to flight?

Prayer

Steadfast God, you know the sorrows of my heart before a sigh ever passes my lips. For your presence in sadness and your promise of joy, I give you thanks. Help me to support those who sorrow and to bear your joy to our hurting, hungry world. Amen.

Act in Faith

Call someone you know who is experiencing sorrow (perhaps because of a job loss or other financial stress) to offer comfort. Or plan an action that will bring joy to a child in need—an outing or an unexpected treat such as a new book.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Psalm 146:5-10

Happy are those whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. (Psalm 146:5-7)

Reflection

“Who God is, Bubba?” three-year-old Connor asked his grandmother.

The psalmist reminds us that our amazing God is the one who created all that is—land that gives forth such abundance, peoples that inhabit it—the rich and poor, young and old, a rainbow of colors and a symphony of languages. Our steadfast God is loyal and sure, ever true to God’s promises even when we have been faithless. Our righteous God is on the side of the children, the vulnerable, those who are crushed by injustice, poverty, discrimination. Our compassionate God sustains us, intending that all who are hungry be fed.

“Who are God’s people, Bubba?” Connor might have gone on to ask. Who are God’s people? Those who are good stewards of God’s creation, sharing its bounty with all; those who are steadfast in covenant relationship to God and one another; those who stand up for children and all who are oppressed and demand justice for them; those who feed the hungry children.

“Who am I?” each of us might ask ourselves. What is your answer?

Prayer

Amazing, steadfast, righteous, and compassionate God, help me to be all that you intend me to be as one made in your image. Amen.

Act in Faith

In the spirit of our God who executes justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry, call your members of Congress and voice support for Food Stamps and child nutrition programs, which help to alleviate child hunger across the country. Or send a card offering encouragement and appreciation to a grandparent who is raising a child. More than two million children are being raised by their grandparents or other relatives without either parent present. Review your state’s Fact Sheet on Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children. (Visit www.childrensdefense.org/childwelfare/kinshipcare.aspx)

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: James 5:7-10

Be patient therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. (James 5:7a, 8b-9a)

Reflection

It was Micah’s first tomato crop and the three-year-old could scarcely stand the agonizingly long wait until the green tomatoes turned red. Enduring the excruciatingly slow passage of days, however, was helped by tasks for the little farmer. He sloshed water from the hose making a glorious mud puddle around the tomato stem, he dug with a trowel to loosen the earth and turned up earthworms, he pulled many weeds and only a few flowers. . . until at long last the sun’s rays had readied his first tomato for picking. He munched it still warm from the sun, tomato juice dripping down his chin.

James and the others eagerly anticipated the coming of the Lord, a time when the righteous and poor would be vindicated and the rich and oppressors would be put down. James’ counsel to be patient did not mean to be passive. Like the farmer, there was much tending and tilling until the harvest of God’s justice.

So too we are called to be like farmers in the waiting time, in the not-yet of God’s coming reign of peace and justice. We are called to prepare the soil through raising awareness of injustice. We are meant to plant the seeds of love and opportunity. We are called to weed out things that harm children and oppress people. We are called to provide the water of education and food and other necessities. And in God’s good time, a harvest of justice will be reaped for all. Until then, we have work to do.

Prayer

Gracious God, keep my heart strong and my sights focused in this waiting time. Help me to prepare for the coming of your justice to our world. Amen.

Act in Faith

Ask your local supermarket what they do with produce that is no longer saleable but still edible. Discuss ways to have the produce donated to programs serving hungry children and families.

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 11:2-6

Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matt. 11:4-5a)

Reflection

What an amazing passage. John wants to know if Jesus is the “real thing,” the messiah for whom they have long waited. Jesus’ response? Don’t take my word for it. Don’t try to find out what others think. Look at what I do, not what I say. What difference have I made? Whose lives have I changed?

How often in forming opinions of someone are we influenced by what they say, or by what others think of them? But what if we only looked to their deeds. What have they done? Whom have they cared for? What kind of a difference are they making? Imagine if that were how we measured the authenticity of our lives, our friends, our colleagues, our religious leaders, our political leaders: What have they done for the most vulnerable? Have they brought good news to those who are in poverty?

Prayer

God of justice and compassion, help me truly to be who you want me to be, who you have created me to be. Remind me to measure myself and others by how we care for those most in need. Amen.

Act in Faith

Contact your Senators and Representative and ask them what they have done to protect and provide for children in need. Then compare their response to the Children’s Defense Fund Action Council’s Nonpartisan Congressional Voting Record. If there is a discrepancy, follow up with a letter. (Visit www.childrensdefense.org and click on “CDF Action Council,” and then “Congressional Scorecard.”)

Lighting the Advent Candle

“May this light shine forth in joyous anticipation of Christ’s coming to fill our hungry hearts and to ease the suffering of our hungry world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 11:7-11

... *Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet. Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”* (Matt. 1:7b-9)

Reflection

Have you ever wondered if, had you lived in Jesus’ time, you would have recognized Jesus as the messiah or if you would have missed the boat? Have you wondered how you would have known? Who or what would have told you that Jesus was truly the Messiah?

If you had tested prevailing opinion, the flimsy “reeds,” you might have written Jesus off. If you had turned to the political leaders of the day, you would have been led astray—or even sought to do him in. But if you’d heeded a humble prophet, lacking any external trappings but guided by an inner spiritual compass, you would have recognized him, you would have known that the one come to redeem us was Jesus—a small, poor baby in a strange land far from home.

Do we, today, recognize Jesus in the faces of the poor, the hungry, the children? Do we recognize him, or are we missing the boat? To whom do we turn for guidance, to shape our opinion, to influence our belief? Popular opinion or polls or radio talk shows that write off poor and struggling families? The rhetoric of political leaders that depicts poor children as a threat and burden rather than a blessing? Or do we listen to those who humbly yet prophetically proclaim the coming of the Lord—born a poor child, died our savior.

Listen to those who herald Christ’s reign of justice and mercy. Listen and look long and deep, and you won’t miss Christ in the face of a hungry child.

Prayer

God, help me listen to you and not be swayed by politics or public opinion. Then help me to see you and care for you in every poor and hungry child. Amen.

Act in Faith

Read the newspaper. What are the messages it is conveying about children? Write a letter to the editor or an opinion editorial offering your perspective on children in need and what should be done.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Love: A Welcome for Every Child

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fourth advent candle of love: “We light this advent candle of love in a world in which children cry out for care, yearn to be loved. Come, O Love incarnate, be born anew in our hearts and world. Amen.”

Hymn: Some Children See Him

Some children see Him lily white,
The baby Jesus born this night,
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
The Lord of heaven to earth come down;
Some children see Him lily white,
with tresses soft and fair.
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
With dark and heavy hair.
Some children see Him almond-eyed,
This Savior whom we kneel beside,
Some children see Him dark as they,
Sweet Mary’s Son, to whom we pray;
Some children see Him almond-eyed,
With skin of yellow hue.
Some children see Him dark as they,
And ah! They love Him, too!
The children in each different place
Will see the baby Jesus’ face
O lay aside each earthly thing,
And with thy heart as offering,
Like theirs, but bright with heavenly grace,
And filled with holy light.
Come worship now the infant King,
‘Tis love that’s born tonight!

Reflection

From the outside, it was a modest little church. If you came to services on that Christmas Eve, you would have entered a tiny sanctuary that just a few years before had echoed with barely a dozen older White members. On this Christmas Eve, however, the pine-scented sanctuary was packed with the congregation that had grown over the past few years to eighty or so, a rainbow of races, ethnicities, family types, and income levels. It had become the kind of church in which, as children looked around at the gathered faces, they knew they belonged. As you looked around, you would have felt at home, too, even though you were just visiting that night.

As you began to watch the Christmas pageant unfold, you might not have known that you were witnessing the greatest testament to the church's welcome and ministry to children. "Mary's" face was half-hidden by her veil, yet you glimpsed a smile of wonder and joy at her unexpected good fortune. The learning disabled girl who played her had finally been adopted as a teenager after endless years of foster care placements. Next to her confidently strode "Joseph," a tall, lanky teen who had found direction and purpose in the church's youth group, transforming a grim future in which the odds were stacked against him as a Black, urban male, into a future bright with promise. The "angel Gabriel" proclaiming good news of great joy was a teen in foster care who for the first time in years knew her own great happiness—a nurturing foster home and nourishing faith. Two brothers played shepherds, children of well-off, educated parents who felt at home and a part of this diverse community. One of the wise men was a young Jamaican girl whose academic promise had been recognized by the pastor who had then guided her into a program for gifted children. And in the manger lay "Jesus," a baby with Down Syndrome born into a stunned but loving family with three teenage children. All these children were embraced by the larger church family.

If you were one of our nation's 523,000 children in foster care, one of the 119,000 children in foster care awaiting adoption into permanent, loving homes, if you were a child with learning disabilities, developmental delays, or other special needs, if you were a child with great potential but limiting circumstances, you would have finally seen yourself in the Christmas story.

You would have seen Jesus as one who came to live in your skin, to see through your eyes, to feel your pain, to know your suffering.

You would have understood the Christmas miracle: that God chose to enter the human realm not as king or president, not as wealthy or powerful, but as a child—a poor child, a child far from home, a child whose parents were refused shelter, a child with parents in unexpected and difficult circumstances, a child whose very life would be in jeopardy from political forces from his first days to his last.

When we minister to and include all of the children—all colors and incomes and family types and abilities—when we include them in our churches, to be sure, but also in our families and communities, when we include them in our policies and priorities as a nation, then all children may see themselves as part of the story. Then all children may look into the mirror and think, perhaps, that they can glimpse the face of God. When we minister to the children that all may see themselves as included, then truly it will be love that was born that night.

Prayer

God of all, let your all-inclusive love be born in me tonight. Amen.

Act in Faith

Offer to give respite care to a child being raised by a foster parent or grandparent so the caregivers can have a break. Or send a holiday card to your members of Congress urging them to “make room in the inn” so that all children who need it can have accessible, affordable, high quality child care.

Monday*

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fourth advent candle of love: “We light this advent candle of love in a world in which children cry out for care and yearn to be loved. Come, O Love incarnate, be born anew in our hearts and world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! ...Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. (1a, 2b, 3)

Reflection

Many of the psalms were the voice of an individual crying out to God. This psalm, however, was a psalm used by the community to give voice to the nation’s fear, concern, and feeling of abandonment by God. Even though the difficult times made them wonder if God cared about them. Nonetheless it was to God that they turned with their pleas, their trust, and their hope.

What troubles bring a cry to the lips of our nation? What cries are muffled or silenced but should be given voice? From what do we need to be saved? To what do we need to be restored? In what ways do the troubles create questions about God? Where do we place our trust and hope?

Prayer

Tender Shepherd, hear my prayer and the prayers of all in need this day. Keep me and all children in your care. Feed us, defend us, guide us in right paths. Keep us mindful that you do not want a single lamb to be lost. Strengthen me to work so that we leave no child behind. Amen.

Act in Faith

Look for a new way to “give ear” to the needs of children. It may be listening, one on one, to a child in your life. Or it may be volunteering for a hotline serving children and teens. Or it may be reading more about the state of America’s children through CDF publications and other sources. Once you have heard children’s needs, respond as best you can.

*If **Christmas Eve** falls on Monday, use the Christmas Eve devotion on page 40 instead.

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fourth advent candle of love: “We light this advent candle of love in a world in which children cry out for care and yearn to be loved. Come, O Love incarnate, be born anew in our hearts and world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:10-16

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Reflection

Five-year-old Jad came home after his second week of kindergarten, his small shoulders slumped. “What’s the matter, hon?” his mother asked. “The teacher never calls on me,” he said with despair. “She told us to raise our hand if we have the answer, and I raise my hand every time, but the other kids raise their whole arm and she calls on them instead!” The little boy’s gesture, literally just lifting his hand at the wrist while keeping his arms at his side, had gone unnoticed.

In today’s reading, God offers to provide a sign to the king. The king, however, refuses the offer with pretended piety. In spite of that, Isaiah tells the king that the sign from God will be the birth of a son named Immanuel: God with us.

In our own day, all too often our leaders—and even we ourselves—turn a blind eye to the sign of God’s promise in the children. All around us are these young signs of God’s presence, faithfulness, and God’s intention for a future of promise and hope. Unseen or unheeded, these wondrous signs fade from view: a baby is abused or neglected, a child is hungry or homeless, a teen drops out or is incarcerated. When we do look, we see not God’s promise but our failure, and we quickly avert our eyes.

Prayer

Ever-attentive God, open my eyes and my heart to the signs of your presence in the lives of little ones. Amen.

Act in Faith

Yesterday’s act in faith was listening to children’s needs. Today focus your action on really *seeing* many different children. (If possible, plan to visit places and programs where you will see children in very different circumstances than those whom you usually see.) Behold the wonder and gift that they are, seek to discern their hurts and needs, perceive God’s presence in these young ones who are made in the image and likeness of God.

Wednesday*

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fourth advent candle of love: “We light this advent candle of love in a world in which children cry out for care and yearn to be loved. Come, O Love incarnate, be born anew in our hearts and world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:1-7

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:7)

Reflection

We usually think of saints as people who were as close to perfect as is humanly possible, don't we? And, with the exception of someone like Mother Teresa, we don't really expect there to be an actual saint in our day.

But in thinking that way, we lose sight of the real meaning of saints: “holy ones who belong to God, consecrated to God's service,” in the words of the *Oxford Annotated Bible*. The New Testament calls all believers “saints,” meaning those who seek to follow God. Being a saint isn't about being perfect; it's about being devoted to doing what God calls us to do. It's knowing that what's special about us isn't who we are, it's whose we are: that we belong to God and we are God's beloved. Being a saint isn't about trying for the perfection that belongs alone to God. It is about being God's servant, devoted to serving the last, the lost, the least and the left behind—the poor, the children, and the strangers.

You are called to be a saint. Yes, you. How will you answer?

Prayer

God, use me even when I don't feel like a saint. Use me in your service to help children and families and people who are poor. I am yours—your beloved, your servant. Help me to know how you want to use me. Amen.

Act in Faith

Take time right now to reflect on and then express how you will serve God. You might express that call to service in a journal entry, by formulating a “mission statement,” in a drawing, in a prayer or poem, or in another form. Then live it out.

*If **Christmas Eve** falls on Monday, use the Christmas Eve devotion on page 40 instead.

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fourth advent candle of love: “We light this advent candle of love in a world in which children cry out for care and yearn to be loved. Come, O Love incarnate, be born anew in our hearts and world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” (Matt. 1:21-23)

Reflection

There is a story about a little boy who was afraid of the dark. Each night at bedtime, he would plead with his parents to stay with him, wanting their presence to help him feel loved and safe. “We can’t stay with you now,” his parents would tell him, “But God is always with you. God loves you and will keep you safe.” Most nights, this seemed to satisfy the child. But on this particular evening, when the night seemed too long, the darkness too deep, his room too forsaken, and the morning too far off, he pleaded with special urgency for his parents to stay. When they repeated their reminder that God would be with him, the little boy replied with exasperation, “I know, but I want someone with skin on!”

God knew—God knows—when our nights are too long, our dark times too deep. God knows when we feel too forsaken and when the dawning of new hope and light feels too far off. Throughout Advent, we have dwelt symbolically in such a time. For many of us, and for many children and families across our nation, the experience of darkness and waiting for the dawn of hope has been not just symbolic but tangibly, painfully real. And in such a time, God understands our need for someone “with skin on.” God sent Jesus, Emmanuel, “God with us” so that we would know, through One “with skin on,” that we are indeed loved and safe. We are indeed saved.

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus so that in the midst of the darkness I know your ever-present love and care. Help me to be the one “with skin on” who helps children and families in hard times to know your presence and care through my own loving care and work for justice. Amen.

Act in Faith

Volunteer to spend time with children or families in need. Possible avenues include a mentoring program, a juvenile detention center, a food pantry, a health clinic waiting room, a tutoring program, and a Head Start classroom.

*If **Christmas Eve** falls on Monday, use the Christmas Eve devotion on page 40 instead.

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fourth advent candle of love: “We light this advent candle of love in a world in which children cry out for care and yearn to be loved. Come, O Love incarnate, be born anew in our hearts and world. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.... (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Reflection

The people who waited in darkness...children living in poverty even though their parents work, children without health insurance who can't see a doctor when they are sick or injured or whose parents are overwhelmed by medical bills they cannot pay, children who suffer abuse and neglect and never receive help, children who drop out of a school that has failed them in countless ways, children who cannot attend quality child care or Head Start programs, children who are hungry, or homeless, or living in unsafe housing, children who are hurt and killed by guns....

All across our nation, people are waiting in the darkness of desperation and despair, doing all that they can with what little they have to hold the lives of their families together, to make it through the day, the week, the month.

For the people, for our nation, for ourselves, let us pray and work for the reign of peace and justice and righteousness. Let us work and pray for the day when all children have what their bodies and minds and spirits need to thrive. Let us pray and work for the end of child poverty, for the end of hunger and homelessness, for the end of gun violence, for the end of abuse and neglect.

The people who waited in darkness have seen a great light. Let us bear the light to them and help to realize the reign of justice and righteousness and peace that Christ came to herald.

Prayer

Mighty God, Prince of Peace, help me to shine your light of justice and righteousness and peace in the lives of all who wait in darkness. Amen.

Act in Faith

Donate money to a program that meets emergency needs of poor families such as paying electricity bills and heating bills. Literally help bring light and warmth into their lives. Then turn your attention to helping solve the justice issues that allow children to be the poorest age group in America and working families to remain in poverty. For this new church year, gather a group of people to set new goals for ministry with and on behalf of children in the church, community, nation, and world.

*If **Christmas Eve** falls on Monday, use the Christmas Eve devotion on page 40 instead.

Christmas Eve

NOTE: Use this reading and reflection for Christmas Eve, whichever day of the week it falls on.

Advent Candle Lighting

As you light the fifth, center Christ candle, along with the previous four: “The light of the Christ candle burns brightly with the love that came into our world this holy night. May we bear that love into our world, especially to the children. Amen.”

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Reflection

It was Christmas Eve in a Florida church. The congregation was comprised almost entirely of “snowbirds”—elderly, retired persons who spend the winter in Florida and live elsewhere the rest of the year. Accordingly, the pastor had not planned a pageant and intended to hold a more traditional service. As the elderly congregation members began to arrive that evening, however, to the pastor’s surprise most were accompanied by their adult children and were holding the hands of their young grandchildren. These visitors from the North had come to Florida to spend the holiday with their elderly parents and grandparents. The pastor realized that for the visiting grandchildren, it just wouldn’t feel like Christmas Eve without a pageant. The Christmas story would not come to life in the same way for them without one.

With little time to prepare, he recalled with gratitude a church secretary who saved all manner of odds and ends—including half a dozen old creche sets, many with figures missing. He hurriedly collected the assortment of figures for the nativity scene and gathered the visiting children in the back of the church. Each child was given a figure—half a dozen Josephs were handed to various children, several Mary figurines went into the eager hands of others. Sheep to these children, cows to those, and a lucky few were given the baby Jesus figures. Angels, shepherds, wise men figurines were distributed, and it was time for the service to start.

The pastor stood at the front of the church and began to tell the Christmas story. As he came to each character in the narrative, he beckoned to the appropriate group in the back of the church to come forward. “Now Joseph went to Bethlehem with Mary, to whom he was engaged,” he began, and an

excited gaggle of children scampered down the aisle holding their Joseph and Mary figurines high. The pastor continued with the narrative of angel proclamations and shepherds tending sheep, the baby's arrival, and the wise men's visit. As he came to the close of the story, he looked to the back of the sanctuary. A small band of children remained, shuffling feet and eagerly awaiting their turn. The pastor was peering in the dim sanctuary, trying to figure out who he had overlooked, when a little voice rang out from the back. "Mister, you forgot about the cows!"

The pastor quickly amended the narrative to include a group of cows that had followed the wise men, and the delighted children took their place with the others at the front of the church.

On a literal level, the story is a wonderful example of the church's hospitality to children—children who were unexpected, who were strangers, who would not bolster the membership rolls or fill the church school classrooms or make substantial pledges. But the children were welcomed and included just as they were, just as themselves. They were not left out or left behind. Which is how we are called to be Church—embracing and including the children not because we know them, not because of what they can contribute to the church, but simply because God loves them and calls us to love them and see that none is left out or left behind.

On a symbolic level, however, the story warns us of the children who are forgotten, left behind by our churches and by our nation. There are children who are left behind, lacking affordable, accessible, high quality child care while their parents work. There are eligible children left out while others participate in Head Start and prekindergarten programs. There are children left behind by poor schools, by poverty, by preventable illness and disease.

When will we look up and realize that we have left this group of children behind? When will we bring them along with the rest of the children?

Until we do, the story is not complete.

Prayer

God, you never forget about me, you never abandon me. Help me to remember all of the children in need and see that none is left behind. Amen.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and make us more loving, oh hear Thou our prayer.

("Away in a Manger," verse 3, adapted)

Act in Faith

Give a gift to an organization in your community that offers loving care to children in need. Possible recipients include shelters for survivors of domestic violence and child care and Head Start programs. Donations could include cribs and bedding, money, books, and warm clothing.

Opportunities for Faithful Child Advocates

Children's Defense Fund Conferences bring child advocates together for inspiring keynote addresses, informative workshops, and opportunities for networking. There are often special sessions tailored for the religious community.

National Observance of Children's Sabbaths is celebrated during the third weekend of October. Religious congregations focus worship services, religious education programs, and congregational activities on learning more about the needs of children and ways we can respond faithfully. An interfaith Children's Sabbath manual provides resources for Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Bahai, Unitarian, Universalist and other faith traditions, including planning tips, worship resources, lesson plans, activity ideas, follow-up suggestions and more.

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry is held at CDF Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, during the third week of July. Each year, religious leaders and other faith-based advocates for children gather for a week of spiritual renewal, networking, and continuing education about children. Participants explore how faith relates to children and advocacy, hear inspiring preaching on children's concerns, gain solid, up-to-date information on children's needs, and acquire new skills, models, and strategies to implement programs to help children and strengthen families in their own congregations and communities.

Stand for Children gatherings take place in June in communities across the country. Children's Action Teams have formed in many communities to plan local Stand for Children events and ongoing strategies for helping children. The Stand for Children interactive Web site, at www.stand.org, provides information, ideas, and inspiration for children's advocates.

Wednesdays in Washington® and Wednesdays at Home® is the centerpiece of CDF's mobilization efforts to Leave No Child Behind. On Wednesdays—in Washington and at home—we are calling on women, grandparents, people of faith, youth, and concerned citizens from all walks of life, to bear witness for children in this new era until the words "Leave No Child Behind" become reality for every child. On Wednesdays, we will gather in Washington, D.C., and where we live. We will come together for leadership development, spiritual renewal, and interfaith worship, and for briefings on issues affecting children and proposals that can help them.

For more information about these opportunities, call the Children's Defense Fund at (202) 628-8787, or visit the Web site at www.childrensdefense.org.

Resources for Faithful Child Advocates

National Observance of Children's Sabbaths® Manual 2005 Putting Our Faith into Action to Seek Justice for Children By Shannon Daley-Harris

This edition explains how congregations and individuals can help eligible families learn about and receive benefits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and Food Stamps. If poor families received all the benefits for which they are eligible, 20 percent of poor children would be lifted out of poverty, and the number of children in extreme poverty would be reduced by 70 percent! This 260-page manual is brimming with easy-to-use planning ideas, prayers, sermon resources, bulletin inserts, lesson plans, activity ideas, and more to help congregations make a difference in the lives of America's poorest children. It includes a wide range of resources, including Catholic, Protestant, Episcopal, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, and interfaith materials that are useful all year long.

Stand Up for Children Now! State of America's Children® Action Guide

Join the Leave No Child Behind® movement! This handy and pithy publication presents the needs of children and families, the choices we have as a nation, and the decades of progress for children now at risk that we must protect and expand. An indispensable purse or pocket companion guide for discussing children's issues with community leaders, policy makers, political leaders, and the media.

State of America's Children® 2005

An essential tool for child advocates for more than two decades, this 2005 special edition takes a close look at 37 million people living in America (including 13 million children) who are poor and the growing numbers of families struggling to survive. Includes personal stories and photographs by leading photo-journalists Alison Wright and Steve Liss; in-depth analyses of the current status of family income, child health, child care and early childhood development, child welfare, education, and juvenile justice; and personal and policy success stories and recommendations for just treatment for children and poor families.

I Can Make a Difference: A Treasury to Inspire Our Children

By Marian Wright Edelman

Marian Wright Edelman has drawn from a variety of cultures and peoples to compile these timeless stories, poems, quotations, and folktales that speak to all children to let them know that they can make a difference in today's world. Illustrated by Barry Moser, the book highlights 12 values children and youth can aspire to achieve. Perfect for parents, grandparents, teachers, and children to share. Available in bookstores and through CDF. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2005.

Children's Defense Fund® Bible

A favorite small format New Revised Standard Version Bible with a children's concordance that underscores our moral obligation to children. Purse-size Bible bound in attractive green leather. It's the perfect gift for births, birthdays, religious holidays, and other special events in a child's life.

I'm Your Child God: Prayers for Our Children

By Marian Wright Edelman

Written in an honest, compassionate voice, with stunning illustrations by Caldecott Honor Medal winner Bryan Collier, these contemporary, multicultural prayers are grouped by themes including hope, love, and gratitude. Offers support for children and teens dealing with the complexities of growing up in today's world and encourages and inspires children on their journey of spiritual formation. 2002. Available in bookstores and through CDF.

The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours

By Marian Wright Edelman

In essays addressed to her own children, to all children, and to parents, Edelman remembers the community of her own childhood with "25 Lessons for Life" that could apply to anyone. 1992. In bookstores and through CDF.

Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors

By Marian Wright Edelman

A collection of powerful and moving stories about the mentors in Edelman's life (her parents, community elders, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, and many others). With honesty, poignancy, and joyful remembrance, she reminds us of the importance of daily mentors in the lives of all children. 1999. Available in bookstores and through CDF.

Guide My Feet:

Prayers and Meditations on Loving and Working for Children

By Marian Wright Edelman

Offers inspirations, prayers of thanksgiving, and meditations of strength for all those who work and struggle to build a movement for children. Instills values of commitment, integrity, care, and service in our children. 1995. In bookstores and through CDF.

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11th Annual Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute Great Preachers Series (July 2005)

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The Reverend Dr. Ann F. Lightner-Fuller

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Symposium on Building the 21st Century Movement for Our Children (July 2004) and other inspiring programming from CDF Haley Farm.

Participate in the CDF Religious Action Forum. Visit

www.childrensdefense.org/religiousaction

Mission of the Leave No Child Behind® Movement

*A*s we enter the 21st century, America's strength reflects our courage, our compassion, our hard work, our moral values and our commitment to justice. Today, we can extend the American dream of our forefathers and foremothers to every child and family. We have the know-how, the experience, the tools, and the resources. And we have the responsibility as mothers, fathers, grandparents—concerned and sensible people across the country.

We can build a nation where families have the support they need to make it at work and at home; where every child enters school ready to learn and leaves on the path to a productive future; where babies are likely to be born healthy, and sick children have the health care they need; where no child has to grow up in poverty; where all children are safe in their community and every child has a place to call home—and all Americans can proudly say “We Leave No Child Behind.”

Our mission and vision in the months ahead is to do what it takes to meet the needs of children and their parents by building on the strengths, and sense of fairness of the American people, learning from the best public and private ideas and successes, and moving forward to a renewed commitment to all our children.



Children's Defense Fund



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