



Churches for Middle East Peace

Advent Resource for Peace in the Holy Land

Advent is a time of waiting. During this season, we look with eager anticipation to the coming of Christ into our lives and our world. Our longing for what will come can awaken us to the yearning, in the hearts of many Israelis and Palestinians, for a lasting peace in their land. During Advent, as Christians in the U.S. we pray for a just peace for the Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. A prayerful reflection is offered for each Sunday of Advent.

Overview of the Situation

The Holy Land is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, but a tragic decades-old conflict has brought violence and suffering to its two peoples – Israelis and Palestinians – who yearn for a just peace. A durable peace agreement is essential for the future wellbeing of all the peoples of the Holy Land, including the Christian community, which is rapidly emigrating due to the difficult political and economic conditions imposed by the conflict.



David Snyder/CRS
Children in the West Bank
express their desire for peace.



In November, 2007 the United States convened an international conference in Annapolis, Maryland and launched a new political process aimed at achieving a two-state peace agreement by the end of 2008. The last time a major peace initiative was attempted was in 2000, but when those talks failed, violence erupted and prospects for peace became dim. Over the last year, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have been taking place and efforts to improve the situation on the ground undertaken. There has been some progress but a comprehensive agreement in the near future is unlikely. However, the Annapolis process provides an important groundwork for continued engagement by the next Administration.

A two-state solution that establishes a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel and resolves the core final status issues, including borders, security, water, refugees and Jerusalem, is the best hope for achieving peace in the Holy Land and fostering a more stable and secure region.

Christian leaders and congregants from across the country are joining together this Advent and New Year season to urge the next President to make Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking an immediate foreign policy priority. American Christians, together with Jews and Muslims, have an important role to play in praying for peace and in raising their voices with elected officials and with the wider public. **To find out how to join in this and other ecumenical Christian advocacy efforts, go to www.cmep.org. To learn more about how the Catholic Church is responding to this issue, please visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml>.**



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First Sunday of Advent

Children of Abraham

Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7



"No ear ever has heard, no eye ever has seen, any God but you."

Sometimes we forget that as followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we are all children of Abraham. But like the Israelites to whom the prophet Isaiah speaks, we have all too often "hardened our hearts" toward our sisters and brothers. We have seen our differences, not our commonalities. In our relations with one another, we have fostered intolerance instead of welcome and division in the place of willingness to work together.

Isaiah reminds us: "We are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands." Advent is a season of new beginnings and it is a time when we can remember that we are humble, created beings; we are not the master potter and we do not have the ability to clearly see the entirety of God's vision. No single religious community can achieve peace in the Holy Land on its own; instead, all must work together to reach a shared commitment to peace.

During this Advent season, let us, as Christians, remember humility and present ourselves before God as humble servants. Let us focus on being malleable, approaching God—and one another—with open and willing hearts.

To God, the Father of Abraham, our prayer during Advent is this: *Father of All, may you once again gather "the tribes of your heritage." Bring us to the table, that we may work together as the children of Abraham.*

For Further Reflection. . .

Is my attitude toward my brothers and sisters of religions other than my own one of acceptance and love? Do I recognize that we are all God's children? How can I reach across the boundaries and divisions that have been created to humbly work together for peace in the Holy Land?

Prayer for Middle East Peace

Gracious God, you have promised through your prophets that Jerusalem will be home to many peoples, mother to many nations. Hear our prayers that Jerusalem, the city of your visitation, may be for all—Jews, Christians and Muslims—a place to dwell with you and to encounter one another in peace. We make this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.



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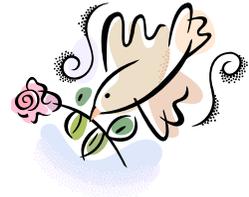
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Second Sunday of Advent

Called to be Prophets

Mark 1:1-8

"Prepare the way of the Lord!"



A voice cries out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

We, too, are called to be prophets. We, too, are asked to listen to the voice of the Spirit and to open our mouths to proclaim God's vision.

What is this vision? It may help us to recall some of the images that we see in the Old Testament: Isaiah 40 paints a picture of comfort, given to a suffering people (vs. 1) and the Shepherd gathering lambs into his arms (vs. 11). Psalm 85 tells of a proclamation of peace (vs. 9), the meeting of Love and Truth (vs. 11) and a kiss between justice and peace (vs. 11). These images challenge us, in our modern context, to respond to suffering, to proclaim peace, and to build a world of justice for all.

Over 2,000 years ago in the Holy Land, John the Baptist announced, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" as a people awaited the birth of their Savior. We are challenged today to follow in his footsteps and to become prophets of peace, "preparing the way" through our relationships, our attitudes, and our actions, for all in the Holy Land to live, peacefully and respectfully, as brothers and sisters.

For Further Reflection. . .

How is God calling you to speak with a prophetic voice this Advent? To what misperceptions, misrepresentations, or injustices have your eyes been opened? How can you use your voice to educate others in order to lay the groundwork for a just and lasting peace in the Holy Land?

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Third Sunday of Advent

Perseverance in Prayer

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24



*“Pray without ceasing. . . Do not quench the Spirit. . .
The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.”*

We are called to pray unceasingly. What does prayer do? It invites God’s presence; it asks for action on the part of the divine.

It also challenges us—it melts our hearts, transforms our consciences from the inside out, and moves us to act. It is in prayer that the veil is removed and our eyes are opened to see all persons, whether the same as us or different, as made in the image and likeness of God and with inherent dignity. In true prayer, we cannot help but to see God’s face in all people, even those who we may perceive as our enemies.

Prayer turns us into God’s hands and feet in the world. God is the “joy of my soul,” says the Prophet Isaiah (61:10). From inner transformation comes outer action. We are inspired and moved in prayer to go into the world and to right what is wrong. We do so renewed, no longer weighted by our doubt or despair, but renewed by faith and certain that what God asks of us can be achieved.

During Advent, let us enter into prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds and to give us the gifts that we need to perform the work of peace in the Holy Land.

For Further Reflection. . .

Is peace for the Holy Land part of your prayer? Why is unceasing prayer important? Does your prayer move you to live and become a presence of peace in the world?

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Do Not Be Afraid

Luke 1:26-38



"Nothing will be impossible with God."

It is easy to lose hope with conflicts that have persisted over decades, such as that in the Holy Land. When discord has become the norm and no solution is in sight, it is hard to see how peace could ever prevail.

But God has never been limited by the short sightedness of human vision. The beauty of Mary's "yes" is that she refuses to be constrained by human experience, acknowledging that with God, reality is expanded beyond what humans know. During the season of Advent, we are challenged to listen carefully to the angel's proclamation, which is no less true for us than it was for Mary: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Advent is a time of anticipation, a period of waiting for the joy that is to come, a season when the impossible seems more likely—as witnessed by the miraculous conception of Christ and at Christmas, the entry of God into humanity.

Now, as many times in the past, prospects for Middle East peace seem dim. However, Advent is a time to suspend skepticism, allay doubts and quiet fears and instead envision what peace in the Holy Land might be like for the long-suffering peoples who have endured conflict far too long.

For Further Reflection. . .

During times when prospects for peace seem grim, how can you maintain hope that peace can be achieved? What will peace, with two states living side by side, mean to Israelis and Palestinians? How can you help yourself and others go beyond the limits of human vision to imagine the peace the God truly desires?

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