



HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2012 Resources for Christians

Themes and Reflections on Revised Common Lectionary Texts for Advent 2, Year C December 9, 2012

Prepared by Rev. Sandra Strauss

What is Human Rights Day?

In 1945 when the United Nations was created, its charter affirmed the "dignity and worth of the human person."

On December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which affirmed this basic tenet of the UN charter. The nations of the world and several faith groups now celebrate December 10 as Human Rights Day. There are 30 short articles in the UDHR. The first article states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and human rights." The third article adds, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

Article 5 states clearly, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." So the prohibition against torture derives from the agreement by the nations in the UN that the principle of honoring the dignity of human beings – a principle shared by all major religions – is an underlying principle for both nations and individuals. Thirty-six years later, on December 10, 1984, the UN General Assembly adopted the text of the Convention Against Torture, an international treaty ratified by the U.S. in 1994. The nations of the world and several faith groups celebrate December 10 as Human Rights Day. December 10, 2012 will be the 64th anniversary of the signing of the UDHR.

Some general themes that apply for Christians for both Advent and Human Rights Day:

- Light vs. darkness
- Time of preparation
- Hope
- Reversal/restoration
- Love

Meditations/Commentaries on Revised Common Lectionary texts for Year C (December 9, 2012)

- Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4
- Luke 1:68-79
- Psalm 126:1-6
- Philippians 1:3-11
- Luke 3:1-6

On the follow pages are sermon starter notes/meditations for each of these lectionary texts. You are welcome to adapt these for your own use. If you have questions, you can contact the National Religious Campaign Against Torture at campaign@nrcat.org.

Baruch 5:1-9

Baruch, part of the Apocrypha (typically included in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles between the Old and New Testaments) was written and set during the time of exile, when the best and brightest in Jerusalem were taken in captivity to Babylon. It was a dark time for God's chosen people, and Psalm 137 provides a stark reminder of the pain that the captives felt:

1 By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

History suggests that Jewish captives in Babylon were treated fairly well.—They most likely did not experience the kind of torture that many prisoners in our own time do. Still, experiencing captivity in any form is enough to cause weeping and struggle to “sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.”

Baruch’s words, however, are designed to provide hope. God hasn’t forgotten the captives, and God is a God of mercy and justice. Returning to their home in Jerusalem would mean return of self-respect, as well as respect among other nations in the region.

Since God is a God of mercy and justice, and we, as people of faith, are called to be God’s agents in the world, we are to provide hope and work for restoration for torture victims and their families, as well as healing and restoration for those who engage in acts of torture.

We cannot stand idly by when we understand that abuses—indeed, actions that we would define as torture—are happening in all kinds of facilities where people are being held in captivity for a multitude of reasons. Acts of torture are illegal under international treaties and under the laws of most nations, but many nations, including the U.S., have engaged in torture because there has been no independent oversight in place to prevent it.

Calling for the U.S. Signing the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture:
On this Human Rights Day, we must work to return those who suffer torture and trauma to a place of self-respect and restoration within society. When prisoners are hidden away in the shadows and living in the darkness of torture, we have an obligation to stand in God’s light, and focus that light on all the dark places where captives live in fear and terror. The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) is a tool to help shine the light into those dark places and expose actions that damage and degrade prisoners as well as the perpetrators of these actions. The OPCAT can help to prevent torture and abuse by requiring establishment of independent oversight bodies to examine the treatment of prisoners and detainees. Sixty-three nations, including Great Britain, and more recently the new government in Tunisia, have ratified OPCAT. The U.S. is not among these nations.

We must contribute to creating and maintaining a safe path for all of God’s people by permanently shining God’s light in every place where there is a potential for harm—prisons and any other places where people can be hidden away and treated as less than human, and also on the laws and policies that shape how we function in an often hostile world. Working for the ratification of OPCAT by the United States is one concrete way that we, as Christians, can join with all people of faith and good will to abolish torture and all forms of cruel and inhumane treatment.

Malachi 3:1-4

Malachi is set at a time when the Babylonian captives (the exiled Jewish community) had been permitted to return to Jerusalem. While the temple had been restored after its destruction in 586 BCE, life was still difficult for the community that had returned. They had expected that their fidelity to God would have resulted in return of their previous fortunes, but when it didn't, they began to turn from God. The priests were among the worst offenders, and were leading their flocks away as well. Malachi (the messenger—literal definition) is warning the people that God is coming to judge them for their sinful ways. It's in some ways a frightening message—the process of refining and cleansing as described is painful, but the message is coming from a loving God looking to sanctify us so that we are able to face God with acceptable offerings and actions.

It seems that our “priests”—those in positions of leadership—have sometimes led us in the wrong direction in our own society. At times, appointed and elected officials have placed themselves in the position of God, judging certain persons for their actions, and sentencing them with little or no outside input. Torture has become an evil form of refiner's fire or fullers' soap for those who exact “justice.” Others of us, even with some knowledge of what is happening, have failed to respond, and in some cases, have actively supported a form of justice that is not of God. Are we like those returned from captivity—turning from God because life isn't as we think it should be?

Our leaders are sometimes able to act in ways that are counter to Christian understanding of how we are to treat our fellow human beings because they act with no independent oversight of their actions. The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) would require such oversight. Unfortunately, the U.S. has not yet decided to join 63 other nations who have ratified OPCAT. Not joining OPCAT and creating oversight bodies keeps in darkness what happens in our prisons, detention facilities, and other places where people are held against their will.

It makes sense that Human Rights Day occurs during Advent, a time of preparation for receiving an incarnate God into the world. How can we face this Jesus the Christ, and the God who loved us enough to send him to educate us and lead us in the ways that God intended of humanity? As beings created in God's image, what does it mean when we tacitly permit cruel and inhumane treatment of our fellow human beings, also created in the image of God? If God made flesh is coming to draw us from death into life, and if God calls us to love our neighbors, aren't we called to act to ensure that our brothers and sisters who are suffering unspeakable horrors can experience God's love? Our support of OPCAT, and our work for the President to sign it, gives Christians a way to proactively draw attention to the existence of torture and influence change that can help put an end to its use.

Speaking out and acting to end torture isn't easy. We must face those who believe that we, and not God, should carry out acts of cruel vengeance on our fellow human beings. Walking that road may indeed feel as if we are experiencing the refiner's flames, but it is also a cleansing act for us—and part of a faithful life that prepares us to meet Christ again at Christmas.

Luke 1:68-79

The first chapter of Luke is a chapter filled with hope and thanksgiving. The priest Zechariah is visited by an angel who tells him that his wife, despite her advanced age, will conceive a child

who will be John the Baptist (though Zechariah's initial disbelief caused the angel to strike him mute!). A few months later, the angel Gabriel visits Mary, who is to carry Jesus, the Word made flesh, into the world. Zechariah's wife Elizabeth and Mary, who are relatives, meet and rejoice their impending births. At the time of John's circumcision and naming, Zechariah regains his voice and sings his own song of thanksgiving, which is where this text begins.

However, Zechariah goes beyond thanksgiving as he shares that this baby will be the one to prepare the way for Jesus—a "prophet of the Most High"—and will prepare the people for receiving him. He tells the people that Jesus' birth—the "tender mercy of God"—represents the "dawn from on high" to provide light for those in darkness, and illumination for the "way of peace."

One commentator says, "Mercy is one of Creation's intentions." As the face of God in the world, we are called to reflect God's mercy and offer hope for the hopeless. How do we do that in the context of torture?

As people of faith, we can be the prism that reflects the light of the dawn into the dark places—dark places where torture victims may be quite literally in darkness, and certainly living in the shadow of death. The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) is one of the facets of our prism—and our support for the President to sign it can ensure that the light is truly focused in those dark places by opening a window to allow the light of independent oversight in to expose where torture and abuse are sanctioned and are happening.

By actively supporting the President to sign OPCAT, we can help to shine the light of Christ as a beacon of hope for families and loved ones of torture victims, and hopefully, the victims themselves by our actions to end torture and abuse everywhere. We can work to create an environment where mercy, rather than retribution, reigns, and where peace is possible because we treat our enemies with love, rather than hate.

Psalm 126:1-6

This psalm appears to be referring to a similar time as that in the Malachi passage—a time after the initial celebration of the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, when their fortunes had again gone into decline. Laughter and rejoicing faded when it became apparent that the reversal they expected—a triumphant return where all would be restored and well immediately—didn't happen. However, something unexpected did happen—another reversal in fortune, though not the financial kind. Israel's status among the nations that once mocked them and their God had changed, and they, too, recognized that God had "done great things for them." And hope still remained as the community called upon God to restore their fortunes, even as they "sowed in tears." This community believed in a God that could turn things around.

The God we worship and celebrate is a God of reversal and restoration as well. In Chapter 43, Isaiah shares this message from God: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Earlier in that chapter, we also hear the following: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

Reversal and restoration are indeed possible, but it seems that in God's eyes, we must be partners with God, who will be with us every step of the way, to help make it happen.

As we consider Human Rights Day, we of course think of the victims of torture who long for reversal and restoration. However, that will not happen without reversal and restoration in the hearts of those who sanction and carry out the activities that degrade and dehumanize our fellow human beings. And in turn, changing the hearts of those who torture requires reversal and restoration in the hearts of God's people who oppose torture, and that takes more than just mental or moral opposition, it takes action.

Sometimes it seems that the powers and principalities (darkness) are too much to overcome. It's easy to believe that the situation is hopeless, and we don't have the power to effect change. It's then that we must remember the God that has "done great things for us," who will "do a new thing" if we are willing to walk through the fire trusting in God's protection—the God that has the power to reverse injustices and restore all who are victims or perpetrators of it.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) provides a mechanism for overcoming the darkness by exposing the powers and principalities that create an environment where torture can happen out of view. Many nations—63, in fact, including the new government of Tunisia that took power as a result of the Arab Spring—have ratified OPCAT, which opens prisons to independent oversight designed to prevent the use of torture. Information gleaned through OPCAT is what gives all people of faith and good will the power to work toward an end to the use of torture everywhere.

Ending torture means that we must repeatedly "sow in tears"—through actions and prayer—trusting that God will open up the springs that turn the seeds we've sowed into a great harvest of justice. A good harvest requires good light—without it, the harvest can quickly wither. Sowing the seeds of light through support of tools like OPCAT can help to produce a harvest of justice.

Philippians 1:3-11

Paul himself was a prisoner when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. We cannot know the exact circumstances of how he was treated during his imprisonment—was he tortured or mistreated? He doesn't say. Perhaps the point is to remember the hope Paul expresses when he thinks of his Christian brothers and sisters on the outside, holding him in their hearts, and continuing to spread the gospel that was the cause for his imprisonment in the first place.

So what is the cause for his hope? Paul trusts that "the one who began a good work...will bring it to completion..." He prays that their "love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you (the Christian community outside) determine what is best." This kind of love is obviously more than an abstract notion—it requires action. It's the kind of love that can produce a "harvest of righteousness."

Paul sees his own work as spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus preached a gospel of love, reminding us to do to others as we would have them do to us, and that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love neighbor as ourselves. Paul believes in the power of this message, and that this insight will make a difference in how his brothers and sisters will think and act. Despite the setback of his imprisonment, Paul appears to believe that the kind of love he offers and urges the early Christian community to live will result in a more just and righteous world.

On Human Rights Day, we must remember the God, in the person of Jesus, who proclaims that love is first and foremost—that the entirety of the law is based on love, treating others as we wish to be treated. For Christians, this means we must resist laws and policies that permit the mistreatment and torture of others as violating the commandments to love God and neighbor. When we hurt our brothers and sisters by committing acts of torture, we dishonor the God who created all persons in God’s image, and we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we all treated our neighbors as we would wish to be treated, torture would not be in the picture.

On this Human Rights Day, we can do more than just resist laws, policies, and actions that result in torture. We can work for something concrete that would shine a light on prisons and detention facilities to reveal where torture and abuse are being used.

Paul calls on his fellow Christians to risk their own freedom to continue proclaiming the gospel, and we are called to do the same. One way we can help to proclaim the gospel is by calling on the President to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) as a way to love our neighbor and prevent treatment to which we ourselves would not wish to be subject. Unlike Paul, we are not likely to face imprisonment for speaking and acting on behalf of the gospel, but we certainly do risk being accused of being “soft on terrorism,” called names, or even vilified for doing so. It’s not easy, but this is part of what it means to live a Christian life.

We can be the ones who “begin a good work” based on love of neighbor that grows into a harvest of righteousness. Our work to prevent the use of torture by exposing it through tools like OPCAT—even when it isn’t as successful as we’d like—can be a cause for hope for all whose lives are touched by torture.

Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist’s ministry began at a time when it was dangerous to speak out against the status quo, for the Romans and their representatives in the region were known for controlling and punishing those who got out of line. Indeed, the high priests and Pharisees (leaders of the Jewish community) sought to stay out of trouble by, if not conspiring with the Roman hierarchy, not rocking the boat. It probably is not a coincidence that Luke names seven who were in leadership positions in the region in this “fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius”—stark juxtaposition to John, who was living in the wilderness and very distinctly preaching things that would certainly not be looked upon kindly by these men.

Like many of the earlier prophets, John seems an unlikely figure to deliver the message of Jesus coming into the world. Why, after all, would God send someone who dressed funny, ate strange things, and lived in the wilderness to call “all flesh” to prepare the way for the one who would show us the salvation of God? Could it be that God was preparing them for what was to come—the risk of death or imprisonment that those who challenged the Roman power structure might face (both of which John and Jesus experienced)? Or could it be more hopeful—that we might see these seven powerful figures in the light of Mary’s song of thanksgiving (the Magnificat, in Luke 1) for God siding with the lowly vs. the mighty?

Times may seem quite different today—but are they really? There are places where those who take the kind of risks John the Baptist took will pay with imprisonment and torture, or even their lives. We can’t pretend it isn’t there or turn a blind eye because it doesn’t affect us personally. If we take John’s message seriously, preparing the way of the Lord goes far beyond the literal preparation that he and others undertook to prepare for the arrival of Jesus. Jesus’ entry into the

world didn't put an end to the abuse of power, the abuse of prisoners, and the abuse of dissenters—what it did do was introduce us to how we need to live and love in order to address the abuses and make it possible for “all flesh to see the salvation of God.”

No one needs to see God's salvation more than tortured prisoners and those responsible for their torture. There are few in positions of power that are willing to take a strong, public position for the humane treatment of prisoners. Where does that leave us? Perhaps we need to consider John the Baptist, the most unlikely prophet, the voice crying in the wilderness.

This Human Rights Day, we can, indeed, do a great thing to help those who are isolated and mistreated by joining to stand out from the cacophony to actively standing on the side of justice. The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) is designed to shine the light of independent oversight into prisons and detention facilities in order to expose abuse and torture—the use of which, in many cases, is illegal. When we call on the President to sign OPCAT, we offer hope for an end to the use of torture—and the inhumanity and degradation of other humans beings that experience it—to both the victims of torture and their families.

We know the way we are to live—John helped to prepare the way, and Jesus explained what is required of us. We can't stand back and pretend we don't have the power or ability. In case after case, God rebuked the prophets for doing so, and equipped them for their task. We, too, as Christians have been prepared and are up to the task. On this Human Rights Day, we must seek out our brothers and sisters who are ready to walk with God to work for justice for all who are tortured and abused so that they and “all flesh” will have the opportunity to see the salvation of God. Supporting the President to sign OPCAT is one way we can work for justice and bring God's light to the world.