

Ignite the Light

A Six Part Devotional Series for Advent & Epiphany

Week 1: "Walk in the Light!"—Asylum Seeker Journeys & Root Causes

"They will beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks....Let us walk in the light of the Lord." Isaiah 2:4-5



Image: <https://images.flydenver.com/Art-at-DIA/Permanent-Works/Children-of-the-World-Dream-Peace/> Mural by Leo Tanguma.

Reflection: After a first chapter exposed in detail God's distaste for the violence, bribery, and lack of respect for the poor rampant in Judah and Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah offered a vision in chapter two of how to move beyond their corruption and seemingly incessant evil. It would require a "trade in" of destructive war weapons for productive, life-encouraging garden tools. Art and statues inspired by the prophet's vision are around the world; in a statue near the United Nations—and even in the Denver International Airport's "Children of the World Dream Peace" mural (at left)! For migrants trapped on seas, stuck at borders, riding atop trains, lost in deserts, or locked in cold cages, a vision of the powerful turning over spears for plows offers hope.

In recent years, U.S. funding to support the healing of root causes of Central American refugee flows has diminished to only a billion dollars, while funding for enforcement and walls to confront refugees at our border has been over \$20 billion. Central American country mismanagement and corruption further complicates funds that are sent to governments. (See *"Root Causes of Migration in Central American Countries"* by NPR [here](#).) Nations in the region have some of the highest homicide and violence rates, poverty, and climate crises in the world; exacerbated by long term economic and drug interests of the north. As in Isaiah's time, evil seems unending; but can be overcome if we dare seek to nurture life, heal from lust of power and violence, and stand in love with migrants so often trapped in the vortex of conflicts.

Story: Seeking protection is a human right. One Honduran leader who calls with conviction upon powerful companies and government officials to trade weapons in respect for human rights is Betty Vasquez. From the indigenous Lenca community, Betty unceasingly seeks to stop the destruction of Lenca community lands and rivers by hydroelectric corporations in the Santa Barbara region of Honduras. For her work to support communities being displaced, flooded out, and subject to pollution because of land grabs for dams, she receives consistent death threats.



Photo by Sharon Stanley-Rea, Santa Barbara, Honduras. Human Rights Leaders bravely fighting loss of indigenous water rights.

Actions and Resources:

- Read the [Report from the Root Causes Delegation](#) of 2019 to Honduras, led by Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, SHARE Foundation, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and the LCWR to see a summary of key root causes of refugee flows. Then, engage in actions to **urge passage of H.R. 1945**/suspend of U.S. security assistance to Honduras until human rights violations by security forces cease, and to **support Senate Bill 459 and H.R. 1134**/preventing crimes and terrorism in arms trade.
- Join a future delegation to Central America or elsewhere to study causes of migration, and think about studying with programs such as [Cristosa](#) in El Salvador to study asylum, human rights, and migration.
- Learn more about US which asylum and other immigration policies have shifted in recent years [here](#), from PBS' Frontline, and read this "Return to Danger" [August report](#) from Human Rights First, which chronicles dangers faced by thousands returned in 2019 through "Remain in Mexico" policies.

Prayer: Forgive us, God who seeks justice, for our slowness to cease our implications in evil. Turn us, God of all, to give attention to your children displaced and seeking safety. And lead us on a path towards plowshares, that we might walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.

By Rev. Dr. Sharon Stanley-Rea, Disciples Refugee & Immigration Ministries.

Find other worship and Holy Days resources at: <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/refugee-immigration-ministries/bible-study/>



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Week 2: “Shine the Light!”—Separation of Children & Families in Detention



“The baby shall play by the cobra’s den, and the child shall lay his hand on the adder’s lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain. . .” Isaiah 11: 8-9.

Reflection:

The context of this quote from the prophet Isaiah is Rule of Emmanuel. Following passages in social injustice and violence, Isaiah envisions a world of justice and peace where animals and children play together without fear. No child in this world should be hungry, or afraid, or mistreated, but many thousands of children today are hungry and live in fear. The United States, tragically, enacts policies that create trauma for children at our southern border. Between December, 2018 and June 2019, at least 8 children died in detention. Many reports provide evidence of unsafe and unhealthy conditions for immigrant children held in detention separated from parents or adult family members. Many people have been outraged at images of children in cold, crowded, unhealthy facilities and have taken action to challenge inhumane policies. Legislators in both parties deplored an order to deport seriously ill children who could die if deported. Advent gives us a challenge to *shine the light* on cruel treatment of children, and to work for the Rule of Emmanuel.

Story: As reported in **USA Today**, June 23, 2019, a legal team interviewed 60 children at a facility near El Paso, Texas, and reported many instances of neglect and mistreatment. Three girls told attorneys they were trying to take care of a 2 year old boy who had wet his pants without a diaper and whose shirt was smeared with mucus. “A border patrol agent came into our room with a 2 year old boy and asked us, ‘Who wants to take care of this little boy?’ one girl said. A law professor who was interviewing children said she couldn’t learn anything about the toddler. He was not speaking. Holly Cooper, co-director of University of CA Davis’ Immigration Law Clinic, said: “In my 22 years of doing visits with children in detention I have never heard of this level of inhumanity.”

Actions and Resources:

- On October 24, 2019, the USA Commission on Civil Rights issued a comprehensive report, “**Trauma at the Border: The Human Cost of Inhumane Immigration Policies,**” which shines light on treatment of children in particular (www.usccr.gov; Publications; Briefing Reports.) The detailed Report opens with a Letter to President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Speaker Pelosi and concludes with the Commission’s key recommendations to the Administration and to Congress.
- Ask your Representative in Congress to pass the *Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act (H.R. 2415)* which would improve conditions and limit detention for children, pregnant women, survivors of violence, and other vulnerable people.

Prayer: Emmanuel, God-With-Us, shine your light of compassion on children and families treated inhumanely as they seek safety in the U.S. Shine your light of mercy in the hearts of government officials that they may be transformed. Shine your light of persistence on advocates for children. Amen.

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By Sister Marie Lucey, Franciscan Action Network.

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Week 3: "Light in the Desert!"—Unaccompanied Minors: Alone & Seeking Hope Again

"The desert and the parched land will exult....They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song....Be strong, fear not! Here is your God...he comes to save you." Isaiah 35:1-4

Reflection: I lived for several years in the Southwest U.S. where I was always fascinated by the desert. One of my favorite things to do was to go on a hike in the desert when the cacti were in bloom. As beautiful as those moments were, I knew where I was and how to find my way back. I was safe. However, I also experienced how challenging and almost impossible it was to walk in the desert on very hot days. In these past months the image of the southern desert has been in our news. Immigrants, especially young people, have died in the desert trying to reach our southern border. Humanitarians have risked arrest to provide water and food for people stranded in the desert. How many unaccompanied minors have faced the dangers and hardship in the desert in order to look for a better life for themselves and their families? They are seeking hope and a chance for a new life; they have no option. In this 3rd week of Advent, let us not forget to raise our hearts and send our 'light' to young people so their hands and knees may be strengthened, and their hearts which are frightened may hear: Be strong, fear not!



Story: Erminia migrated to the U.S. two years ago from El Salvador when she was 15 years old. She dreams of being a family lawyer. On her first night walking through the Texas desert, Erminia's shoes fell apart. She spent the subsequent three days and two nights crossing the desert wearing only her socks. "There were so many thorns," she recalls, "and I had to walk without shoes. The entire desert."

At age 13, **Mauricio's** mother paid to bring him across the Mexican border. He was passed between several coyotes, and nearly fell victim to a scam. "(A coyote) told me that if I didn't want to walk, I had to pay seven thousand dollars," he says. Mauricio was able to call his mother for help and safely reunite with her. Now he wants to value her sacrifice and succeed in his new home. "For me, the American dream consists of overcoming, of happiness, and of reunification with your family."

Actions and Resources: In this 3rd week of Advent, send light and prayers especially for unaccompanied minors and their needs. Learn about the situation of unaccompanied minors in USA custody. Continue to advocate for unaccompanied minors, and let your representatives and senators know of your concerns about ways they are being treated and held in detention:

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5805654/>
2. <https://theintercept.com/2019/10/29/mexico-migrant-unaccompanied-children-border-crossing/>
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/world/americas/unaccompanied-minors-border-crossing.html>
4. <https://cis.org/Report/Unaccompanied-Alien-Children-and-Crisis-Border>

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Prayer: Jesus, as an infant you fled to Egypt with your mother Mary and Joseph. You were a vulnerable family in a foreign land, looking for shelter and sustenance. Help us to welcome those like you who cross our borders today. We entrust to your protection especially those young people who may be alone in trying to seek asylum in our country. Give us hearts of compassion, humane response, and laws that respect of all immigrants. Amen. (Adapted from Education for Justice)

By Sister Maria Orlandini, Franciscan Action Network.

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Week 4: "Welcome the Light!"—Destruction of Asylum Policies & Access to Due Process

"The Lord will give you a sign: The woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us." Isaiah 7:14

Reflection: The young woman will bear a son and they shall name him God-With-Us. That is the promise of the prophets and the hope of Israel. That promise is fulfilled; that hope realized in the miracle of light, the miracle of God-With-Us. The Holy One has chosen to become one like us and to walk among us still. That is the mystery of the incarnation that we celebrate. Our God walks among us still in the guise of the immigrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker. Will we welcome the light, our God made flesh, as Mary and Joseph welcomed Jesus into their hearts and into their home? Since 2017, our government has continually made it more difficult for us to welcome those seeking refuge. The Trump administration has tightened the rules regarding asylum and has applied ever harsher standards in reviewing asylum applications. Migrants are fleeing their homes to seek refuge in the U.S. because they have heard that in America people are free and the U.S. government just. We pray it may be so someday soon.

Story: Kimberlyne and her 5-year-old daughter, asylum seekers from El Salvador, were returned to Mexico by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security following an initial hearing in the El Paso immigration court.

They were sent back to Ciudad Juárez under the Trump Administration's Migration Protection Protocols, also known as Remain in Mexico. No sooner had they arrived, then they were kidnapped just outside of an Instituto Nacional de Migración office. Kimberlyne's family was forced to pay a ransom to secure their release. When Kimberlyne attempted to make a police report, officers refused telling her that "nothing had happened" and that it "was just a scare." Terrified of being kidnapped again, Kimberlyne and her daughter found temporary accommodation with a local woman, but, she says, "I'll have to leave soon." *Delivered to Danger: Illegal Remain in Mexico Policy Imperils Asylum Seekers' Lives and Denies Due Process.* Human Rights First. Report: August 2019. www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Delivered-to-Danger-August-2019%20.pdf.

Actions and Resources: As people of faith we are called to protect the vulnerable and stand with those in need. This 4th week of Advent we are particularly mindful of those threatened by the administration's decision to return those seeking refuge from violence and fear in their home countries to Mexico to await their chance to plead for their right under international law to asylum in our country.

- **Learn more about asylum and the administration's policies from:** [Interfaith Immigration Coalition](#), [Justice for Immigrants](#), and [National Immigrant Justice Center](#).
- **Listen** to Susan Cohen's music video about the plight of refugees, "[Looking for the Angels](#)."
- **Voice your support for asylum seekers** as you [Send an Action Alert](#) to the Department of Homeland Security asking them to rescind the "Remain in Mexico" policy and support asylum seekers.
- **Call your Members of Congress (202-224-3121)** and share Kimberlyne's story, remind them of our obligations under international and national law, and ask them to protect the right to seek asylum in the U.S.
- **Write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor** and educate your neighbors about the injustice of our current asylum policy and practice.



Prayer: Good and gracious God, thank you for the many ways you reveal yourself to us—in the kindness of a grandmother, the generosity of a neighbor, the comfort of a friend. Give us eyes to see the goodness of your light in the faces of our immigrant neighbors. Give us ears to hear the good news of your word made flesh in those seeking safety at our borders. Give us courage to stand with asylum seekers now threatened by our own government, and with all in need, as we welcome your incarnate love made flesh. Amen.

By Sister Ann Scholz, School Sisters of Notre Dame

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Christmas Eve: “Spread the Light!”—Alternatives to Detaining Children & Families

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” Isaiah 9:2-7

Reflection: Brutality, poverty, and hunger define the darkness that engulfs a conquered people whose safety and security have been stripped away. In this land of deep darkness, its inhabitants hold no power and are without hope. Into this darkness the prophet announces a shining light! God is the deliverer who brings God’s people from oppression to freedom; from darkness to light.

Throughout the season of Advent, we have lighted candles, anticipating God’s inbreaking through light. On Christmas Eve, our hope is renewed as we turn our hearts and our devotion to the “light of all people” (John 1: 4-5), born in the child of Bethlehem. Christian faith names the light as Jesus Christ and understands that the vocation of all human beings is to reflect that light through deeds of compassionate love.



Story: Esther (name changed for protection) looks forward to the joyful day when her children will graduate from an American high school and her family will celebrate each of their accomplishments. She has plans at that point to complete her training to become a registered nurse. In the meantime, she waits eagerly, and not without apprehension, for her immigration hearing to determine if she will be granted asylum.

When Esther applied for asylum, she was told that the process could take as long as three years. Many who have fled violence, poverty and hunger in their home countries are forced to wait, languishing in prisons and detention centers, for the date of their asylum hearing. Single men wait long lonely years in prison facilities; families are separated and stripped of hope and power.

But there are alternatives to detention. One congregation reflected the light to Esther and her four children when the congregation felt called to provide temporary housing for families seeking asylum. With a safe and secure place to live and congregation members to walk with them on their journey, the children are enrolled in school, Esther has a reliable job, they have chosen a church where they worship, and have made friends. Esther and her children are beginning a new life. Even as they await the outcome of their asylum application, they are walking in the light with hope and gratitude.

(Image above from Honduras. Photo by Sharon Stanley-Rea, of villagers who reported environmental degradation and extreme poverty, due to trade policies that displaced their indigenous community.)

Actions and Resources:

- [Write a card or send a gift](https://www.lirs.org/take-action/hope-for-the-holidays/) that offers Hope for the Holidays! <https://www.lirs.org/take-action/hope-for-the-holidays/>
- Learn more about Alternatives to Detention, and how faith partners can support them, [here](#).

Prayer: God who came to free your children from bondage, we pray for all who today awake behind bars, who are made cold by lack of human warmth and by absence of human comforts. Call us all, Lord—even as our hearts are warmed by the reality of your presence in the world, to seek to be your arms in action to show love and justice to ones in need. Amen.

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By Sharon Baglyos, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

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Epiphany: “Light Overcomes Darkness!”—Impacts of “Safe Third Country” Agreements

After finding The Light, they “left for their own country by another road.” Matthew 2:12

Reflection: In his 2019 Epiphany homily, Pope Francis reminds us that the Star was the brightest of all stars. Yet, only the Magi saw the great light. After standing directly beneath the star and allowing themselves to be bathed in the light of Jesus, the Magi altered their course. They rejected the darkness of a human King. Their encounter with Jesus led them to the road taken by Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Like the Magi, they all journeyed to a place unexpected and sacrificed their plans in order to usher forth the Light of God. They saw light that overcame darkness—but had to be open to it. We, too, are called to alter our course of “me, me, me” and “my needs” and take the path illumined by the Magi’s example- that of compassion, justice and concern for all of God’s children.

Story: Alejandra is a 28 year old mother of two who has lived a life of fear and violence in Honduras. She is one of 60,000 asylum seekers who have been placed in the Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as the Remain in Mexico policy. Alejandra prayed for an end to her dark journey and for a compassionate judge who would provide justice to her. She did not know that judges never go to the tent courts. Alejandra was ordered find her way to the international bridge of Nueva Laredo, Mexico, in the dead of night. At 4:30 a.m., she, her kids, and about 50 others, were taken to a tent in Laredo, Texas. Here, at the tent court, they each had a brief encounter with a judge who appeared via video. Like most seekers at the tent courts, Alejandra had no chance to meet with a lawyer. After her brief video hearing, she was sent back to Mexico to wait. The numerous asylum seekers who failed to make it to the bridge by 4:30 a.m. were simply deported in absentia, their claims dismissed. Alejandra had hoped for the Light of Truth. Instead she experienced a scene similar to when Dorothy first meets the Wizard, and was not offered justice.

Actions:

- Write your Congressperson and tell them that MPP violates human rights and represents to the world that USA is not courageous and compassionate, but selfish and greedy. We are better than this. You may send a message [here](#).
- Write a Letter to the Editor explaining the MPP process and how that runs counter to your faith values. Share stats about MPP through [this helpful infographic](#). Image at right also from this source.
- Learn more about damages to migrants caused by “Safe Third Country” Agreements in the articles [here](#) and [here](#).
- Ask a church leader to highlight from the pulpit regarding the dangers of “Safe Third Country” agreements and “Tent Courts.”
- Pray with your family every night for those who are not seated at a table, eating food and sleeping indoors.

TENT COURTS 
In September, tent facilities were set up by the DHS and DOJ in Brownsville and Laredo, Texas with judges videoconferencing into courtrooms to hear asylum cases. The public has not had access to these hearings. The tent courts present a serious due process violation for asylum seekers.

Prayer: Precious Lord, as this Christmas season draws to a close, illumine our vision so we might find your path. The light of justice and truth seems to shine only for a few. Human demagogues want those who are enlightened to return to darkness. Dear Lord, give us the courage to remain in your Light when darkness pulls us away from You. Grant us the wisdom to sacrifice our plans and change course as needed so that your plan for justice will be made manifest. Give us hearts on fire to joyfully usher forth your light of compassion and justice to all the pilgrims who present at our borders. Amen.

By Sister Mary Ellen Lacy, Daughters of Charity

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