

Christmas Vigil Mass (Year B) ***Cecelia Aguilar Ortiz, former Maryknoll lay missioner, Thailand***

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 89:4-5, 16-17, 27, 29; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; Matthew 1:1-25

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the works of our hands. – Psalm 89

Advent is a time of waiting, a time of longing for a new creation, for a covenant fulfilled, for a new Zion, where the reign of God is alive in our hearts and in our world. Advent helps us make room in our heart and make changes to our life that will help us become this new creation, take part in fulfilling this Covenant and bringing about the Kingdom of God. The vigil mass moves us from this place of waiting and preparation to the experience of Emmanuel, “God with us.” The readings today give us a glimpse of what “God with us” looks like, what “God with us” requires of us.

During the 10 years that I lived in Thailand, a predominately Buddhist country, I continually struggled with entering deeply into the liturgical seasons of the church. Although Santa Claus and Christmas lights were prominently displayed throughout the many shopping malls across the country, it took a bit of work to focus on the spiritual and moral significance a holiday like Christmas. In general, living out my faith as a Christian while working together with Muslims and Buddhists in a non-Christian context called me to think and act in new and creative ways in order to share my experience of Jesus, “God with us,” while respecting and honoring the religious traditions that surrounded me.

As a U.S. citizen living abroad and working directly with a Muslim organization, I engaged with men and women from across Asia (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines) whose countries and local communities were and still are impacted everyday by U.S. economic and foreign policies. More than once I was questioned about the idea of the United States as a “Christian nation” with “Christian leaders” while the U.S. government continued to perpetrate unjust wars, unfair trade practices, and anti-terrorism policies that encouraged other governments to expand their military and resolve internal conflicts by greater use of force against their own people.

I was challenged over and over again to listen to their reality and respond with deep humility and great sorrow for the ways our country has betrayed its ideals and principles throughout history. But of even greater concern to me, as a Catholic missioner, is the image of Christianity as a religion of war and an instrument of state power. I take strength and guidance from my Muslim brothers and sisters who work tirelessly within their own community and in the world to promote Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance.

Inspired by biblical scholar Ched Myers, and in light of my experience of mission in Asia, I find myself reading tonight’s scriptures from the perspective of the Matthean community, an oppressed Christian sect within an oppressed Jewish community living in exile after the destruction of Jerusalem. Their memory of Jesus as Emmanuel, “God with us,” as the Son of David, the restorer of Zion, is an experience of hope in Yahweh’s ongoing self-revelation and “everlasting covenant” made with the people of Israel.

Jesus’ birth is surely a sign of hope to a people searching for meaning and strength against the powers that be. But it was Jesus’ life – his teaching, his prophecy, his selfless solidarity with those who are poor and outcast, his mystical experience as the “Beloved of God” who he called Abba – that reassures this early community of believers and which continues to inspire – to challenge us – today.

The language and references to Isaiah used to describe Jesus in today's scriptures should remind us of the Hebrew image of the covenant fulfilled: "... For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 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 2:3-4).

God reveals God's self through Jesus who came to show us the path of peace, the way of justice, to awaken us to the Kingdom of God in our midst. As Christians today and also as citizens of the United States, whose government wields tremendous power throughout the world, it is our duty to follow Jesus and take up his cause: To speak truth to power, to work for a new world order, to build solidarity with people who are poor and oppressed – "to renew the face of the earth."

Our task today, like the task of the prophets, of Jesus, of the early Christian community is a never-ending struggle. But we are reassured and sustained in this work by all those mystics and prophets who have gone before us and especially those that are living among us today.

My experience as a missionary in Asia has taught me two things: First, this is not only a Christian task – the building of the Kingdom of God is beyond any church or faith. Our brothers and sisters from all the great religious traditions of the world have much to teach us about justice and peace and God's self-revealing Love. Our cause is only strengthened by joining with other faith communities and working together for the common good.

Second, this work is not our work, but God's work. We are but instruments of God's overflowing love in this world. Jesus the Christ, the Buddha, the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero – all channels of the Liberating Spirit of God at work in their own time and place. Emmanuel, "God with us" is not just a title; it is a deep and transformative experience of God's presence with us, enlivening us and creating us anew. We are the Christmas story when we live out an experience of Emmanuel "God with us." And as Emmanuel, all things are possible.

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