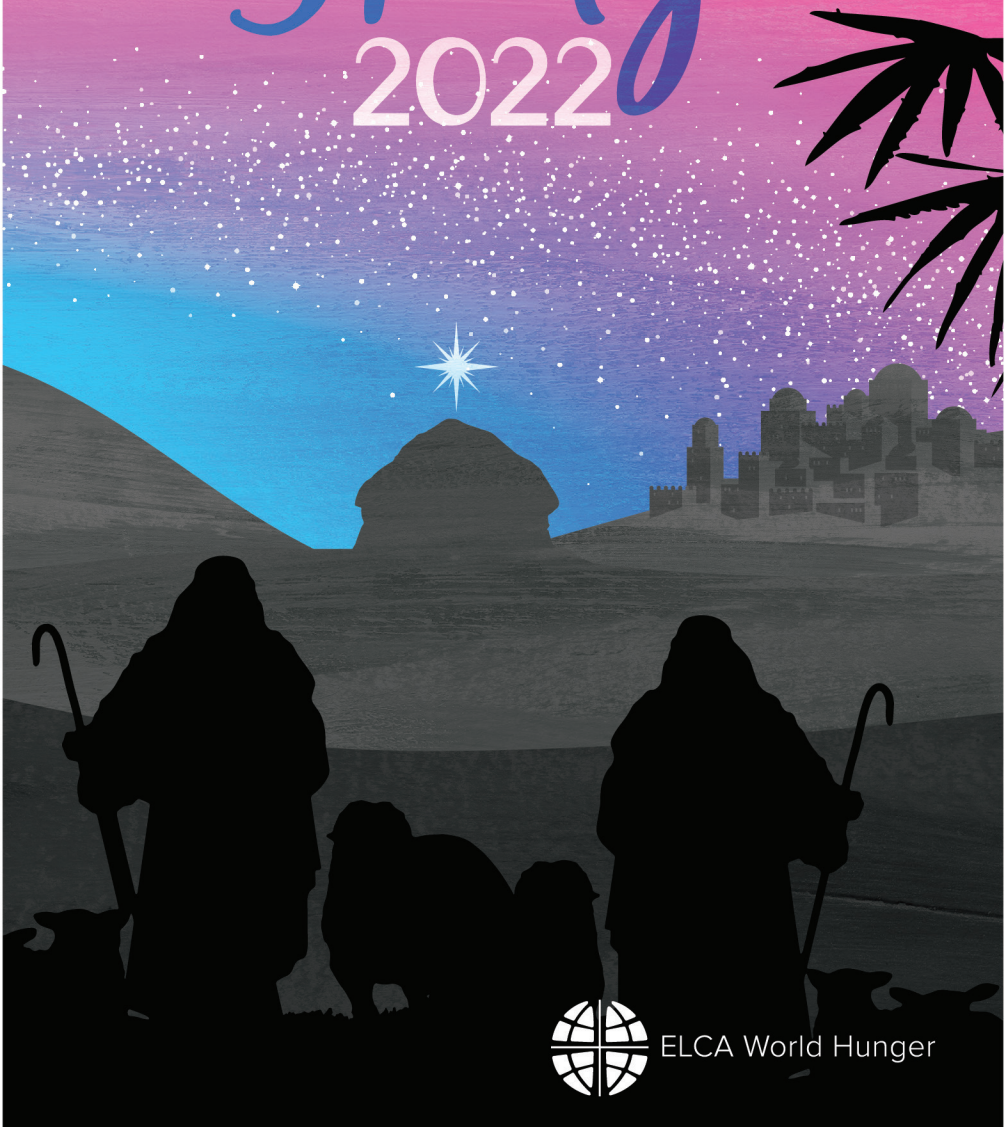


Advent Study 2022



ELCA World Hunger

Dear friends,

Psalms is an intriguing book within Holy Scripture. The hymns, poems and songs that make up the Psalter were collected over generations and reflect a deep and profound spirituality. At times, the psalms wrestle with faith. They pulse with thanksgiving and praise. They tremble with fear and yearn for comfort. Philosopher Alain Locke, ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander and others have described the psalms as analogous to African American spirituals. Both, says Locke, evoke a powerful emotional experience and an intense spirituality that confronts the difference between the world as it is and the world as we long for it to be.

Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373 C.E.) stressed the uniqueness of the psalms, writing (in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase), "Most of Scripture speaks to us; the Psalms speak for us." In them, Athanasius wrote, people of faith could find the words that gave voice to their own spiritual joys and sorrows. While the other books of the Bible feature God speaking to humans or humans speaking to one another, the psalms feature humanity speaking to God in a way different from what we find in the rest of the Bible.

This Advent and Lent, we will journey through the psalms, finding in them the pleas of a people — our spiritual ancestors — for renewal and transformation, for justice and peace, for hope and comfort. We will read the psalmist's lament for the old kingdom of David, which was reduced to rubble. We will read the deeply personal yearning of a people for safety and rest after their experience of war and exile. We will read earnest prayers for a world where justice reigns and all are satisfied. And we will read outbursts of thankful praise for God, who restores the people.

Join us in this season — on your own, with a small group or with your congregation — as we discover together what these ancient hymns can teach us about being people of faith today.

In peace,

Ryan P. Cumming

Ryan P. Cumming, Ph.D.
Program Director, Hunger Education

ADVENT

Session 1 — Psalm 122

"Let us go to the house of the Lord!" —Psalm 122:1



We begin our journey through the psalms with this invitation, and as we will discover, it is a fitting start indeed. Advent, after all, is a season of journeys and anticipation. The journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the journey of magi from the East to greet the newborn king and our own journeys to see friends and family all mark these days leading up to Christmas.

In the psalm for this first Sunday of Advent, the psalmist describes their joyous arrival in Jerusalem, praising the city and the God who protects it and praying for peace within its walls. It's difficult to tell for sure when the psalm was written, but its wording points some scholars to the time of Nehemiah. The city of Jerusalem had been leveled by the Babylonians nearly a century earlier. A small remnant was left behind in the kingdom of Judah, but many of the people had spent a generation living as exiles in Babylon, victims of a war that upended their lives and the life of the nation.

Psalm 122 is one of several "songs of ascent" in the psalms, so called because they refer to the people ascending the hills of Jerusalem. The psalmist describes a pilgrimage to the holy city, shares their awe

at the “city that is bound firmly together” (verse 3) and prays for its peace and security. The words are rich, capturing the wonder a pilgrim might feel. The psalm might even have been written for Jews returning from exile and sung by choirs in flowing harmony as part of a dedication ceremony for the rebuilt walls and temple. It celebrates a new start while evoking nostalgia for the Jerusalem of the past.

How good must these exiles have felt to return to Jerusalem, the City of God, after so many years?

Yet, then as now, the greatness of buildings doesn’t reveal much about the greatness of a community. Jerusalem had known impressive architecture; according to legend, the Temple of Solomon was seldom rivaled. But that glory hid some deep wounds in the kingdom of Judah. Solomon’s Temple, Scripture tells us, was built on the backs of enslaved laborers (1 Kings 9:15-22) and funded by heavy taxes that many could not afford. Before being conquered by the Babylonian empire, Judah was hardly a perfect kingdom. The prophets who foretold its destruction described a society where injustice reigned and the wealthy and well-connected abused their power.

Perhaps this lies at the heart of the psalmist’s prayer for peace and security. In the biblical witness, the community that enjoys peace is the community that practices justice and lives out the covenant through faithfulness to God and care for the neighbor. The prayer in the psalm is not for a return to an idealized old Jerusalem but for a truly ideal future.

A new temple is standing. The walls have been rebuilt. Many of the exiles have returned. And now, the real work of building a community of God begins. For neither the most impressive of temples nor the most fortified of walls is enough to ensure the city’s well-being.

One can imagine two pitfalls for the Judahites yearning for Jerusalem. On the one hand, they may have felt a sort of romantic nostalgia for the old Jerusalem of David and Solomon, with its huge

temple and strong walls. On the other hand, less nostalgic pilgrims may have sung the “song of ascent” in Psalm 122 and imagined that the work of building a new and better Jerusalem was now complete.

Of course, neither view is true. The Jerusalem conquered by the Babylonians was a city rife with injustice. There is nothing idyllic about that past. Nor is the work to build a new community worthy of praise complete. The hard work of establishing justice and peace has only begun.

God’s promise to Judah is God’s promise to us today: a renewed future of peace, justice and security. God invites us to participate in building that future in big and small ways.

The Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA) is a key partner of ELCA World Hunger in Zimbabwe. With support from ELCA World Hunger, LUCSA built schools in the remote Lutheran mission station of Burure, in the city of Gokwe. The schools were a blessing to young people, who had walked long distances to attend classes under a tree.

The schools and two solar-powered “infohuts” — community centers that provide computers for young people to learn life skills — helped LUCSA meet many needs. But the work of addressing deep inequities in the community remained. “When all seemed well, [we] observed that girls continued to miss school every month due to menstruation,” one LUCSA leader explained. Taking a closer look at the situation, leaders found that girls in the secondary school were afraid and embarrassed to attend school during their periods because they lacked access to sanitary pads.

For students around the world, missing school is a key predictor of future hunger. The schools were a blessing for many, yet inadequate access to health care and hygiene products prevented female students from enjoying that blessing.

The buildings were built, but there was more work to do.

LUCSA addressed the problem by teaching both boys and girls to make washable, reusable sanitary pads. "I am so happy because I do not have to miss school or hide myself anymore," said one female student. Another student is thinking of starting a business making sanitary pads.

A project such as this makes the new school buildings not only centers for education but sites for justice and hospitality, where students and teachers work together toward a better future for all.

When all seemed well, the absence of female students showed that something was not right, that the joy of learning in new buildings was being dampened by inequity in the larger community. LUCSA not only built the schools but made them places where the whole community felt welcome and female students could focus on their educations and futures.

For the psalmist and the prophets, the impressive architecture of the old Jerusalem merely hid the deep fissures that divided the community of Judah and left it marred by injustice. But in the new temple and rebuilt walls, the psalmist finds hope for a better future, one in which the buildings' grandeur will more accurately reflect the stability, unity and peace of the people. To pursue that future is to ensure that the injustices of the past remain there.

There is no perfect past to which we can return, and no amount of building or rebuilding will ensure a world of justice and peace. But the season of Advent reminds us that we can and do look ahead to a renewed future, and that the "song of ascent" in Psalm 122 invites us to enter into the future God has promised, with wonder, hope and prayers for peace and justice.

REFLECTION *Questions*

When was the last time you felt wonder, either in nature or in a building?

The psalmist prays for peace and security for Jerusalem. What is your prayer for your community and church today?

Why was it important for LUCSA to help both boys and girls learn about menstruation and how to make sanitary pads?

How might a project such as this contribute to justice for the whole community? What steps might your community take to ensure equitable and just access to resources?

How can safe and stable education help break the cycle of hunger?

ADVENT

Session 2 — Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

“May he defend the cause of the poor of the people.” —Psalm 72:4

Anyone who has worked in a food pantry or donation center during December knows that this season of Advent bears witness to tremendous generosity in the United States. From gift-giving exchanges to bags of food, donations for people in need skyrocket as the end of the year draws near. These donations, and the ministries that distribute them, are key parts of the work to end hunger and poverty. When administered well, hunger relief ministries let neighbors meet each other and build the relationships critical to ending hunger for good. Yet donations of food and other necessities can go only so far in addressing the profound realities of hunger.

The simplest definition of hunger is lack of adequate food, so one might easily assume that the solution to hunger is providing more food, especially through charity. This is a key step, but volunteers at food pantries, soup kitchens and community meals will tell you that hunger is more than the absence of food. Behind the people needing food are stories of eviction, trauma, discrimination and inequity. They are the stories of a father who lost his job because he had no paid sick leave when his daughter took ill, of a woman whose abusive partner drained her savings. They are stories of

high rent, high food prices, high health care costs and low wages. They are stories of an economy in which it's hard to succeed and easy to fail, especially when you have no network of social support to help when things go wrong.

These stories reveal a fundamental truth: we can't end hunger with food.

There is a reason we can predict a community's vulnerability to hunger with reasonable certainty. Hunger and poverty aren't random. While they can happen to anyone, vulnerability to either is not equally shared. Simply put, hunger is not coincidental or accidental. It is the predictable result of policies and practices that reflect a society's choices about who “deserves” to eat and who is welcome at the table.

We don't face a hunger crisis in an otherwise just world; we face a justice crisis in a hungry world.

Psalm 72 offers an interesting perspective on this. On the surface, the psalm seems like a patriotic anthem. The psalmist prays that God will accompany and bless the king, ensuring a reign that lasts as long as the sun and the moon (verses 5, 7). The ruler, the psalmist writes, is a fair judge and a powerful leader, rescuing “the needy” and “crush[ing] the oppressor” (verse 4). It's a heroic vision from an idealistic perspective.

This week's reading from the Revised Common Lectionary narrows that vision. In fact, what may be the most important passage in the psalm is omitted. After heaping praise and well-wishes on the monarch and praying that the king might “have dominion from sea to sea” (verse 8), the psalmist offers these intriguing verses:

*For [the king] 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).*

It's no exaggeration to say that the entire psalm hinges on this verse and the word translated as "for" at the start of verse 12. This is a common word, translated in multiple ways in the Hebrew Scriptures, but in nearly every case it means "because." The lofty praise and hopes for the ruler — the head of civil government — hinge on these key criteria: that the ruler "delivers the needy . . . the poor and those who have no helper . . . and saves the lives of the needy." The exultations depend on a single aspect of the ruler's behavior: actively advocating for and defending those who are poor and needy.

This is a common refrain in Christian history. Martin Luther once wrote that every prince should depict a loaf of bread on their coat of arms to remind them and the people that providing for their basic needs is a central responsibility of the ruler.

There are two things we can learn here, especially during this season. First, government is always accountable to God. No government is "God-given" by its mere existence. Second, this accountability is measured in large part by how well civic leaders care for and protect people living in poverty.

The biblical witness teaches us that the best leaders are not the ones who pray the hardest or in the most visible ways but those whose prayers lead to action — specifically, action on behalf of people in poverty and need.

In Milwaukee, Wis., Hephatha Lutheran Church educates neighbors about the dangers of lead paint in their living spaces and, with support from ELCA World Hunger, distributes lead-free kits containing mops, tape and water filters. The tape can cover chipping paint, and the mops clean up dust from the paint so that children don't breathe it in.

But filters, tape and mops can go only so far. The issue of lead — and the crisis of unsafe water, more generally — is an issue of justice. Environmental policies, housing regulations and health care access are all woven together when it comes to keeping people

safe from lead poisoning. That's why Hephatha also worked with neighbors to start an advocacy group and talk with legislators about keeping the community safe. At a deeper level, access to clean water means not just what comes out of our taps but also what goes into our laws. It's about the community we live in, not just the water we drink.

Addressing issues such as access to clean water is a critical step toward ending hunger. One of the primary drivers of hunger in the U.S. and around the world is illness. When people are ill or lack access to safe, affordable health care, the risk of hunger increases exponentially.

By safeguarding the community's resources and holding the local government accountable for protecting residents, leaders from Hephatha Lutheran Church are meeting immediate needs even as they plant the seeds for a better future in Milwaukee.

We cannot feed our way out of hunger. But by working together with neighbors and holding public leaders accountable for the work they are called to do, we can move beyond "thoughts and prayers," stump speeches and slogans, to enact real change that ends hunger — not just in December, when giving is strong, but all year long.

REFLECTION Questions

Read Psalm 72. According to the psalmist, what makes a good leader?

What role can prayer play in the work to end hunger?

Why is advocating for policy changes important to the people at Hephatha? What policy changes might help people in your community?

What does it mean for governments to be accountable to God for the way they treat people in need?

ADVENT

Session 3 — Psalm 146:5-10

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob . . .
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.” —Psalm 146:5, 7



In the previous session, we reflected on Psalm 72 and its allusions to the responsibilities of “the king” (verse 1) to needy people. There, the writer of the psalm uses vibrant praise of the king to subtly call all civic leaders to account for their treatment of people in poverty and need.

In Psalm 146, the message is a bit different, though that pesky Revised Common Lectionary once again omits some of the most intriguing verses:

*Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish (Psalm 146:3-4).*

To be clear, there is no specific ruler named in Psalm 72 or here in Psalm 146. Both passages are about generic civic rulers, which makes them all the more interesting. Psalm 72 glows with praise for “the king” who “delivers the needy when they call” (72:12). The cynic in Psalm 146, though, seems to have given up on civic leaders and advises the people not to trust “princes,” who, after all, are mere

mortals. Whereas Psalm 72 compares “the king” to God, Psalm 146 draws a sharp contrast between the two. God responds to the call of people in need. “Princes,” on the other hand, participate in their oppression and offer “no help.”

If we in the United States were to take up writing psalms, perhaps Psalm 72 is what we might craft upon inaugurating a new president. Psalm 146 would then be the cynical rejoinder a month or so later, when we conclude that the campaign promises aren’t coming true. The writer of Psalm 146 does the only thing left to them: they find hope in God, who will “keep faith forever” (verse 6).

The psalm, though, isn’t just about giving up on fallible mortals and recalling the people to faith in God. At its heart, Psalm 146 is about who God is. God is the creator of “heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them,” the one “who executes justice for the oppressed,” “gives food to the hungry,” “sets the prisoners free,” “opens the eyes of the blind,” “watches over the strangers,” “upholds the orphan and the widow” and “brings to ruin” the wicked.

There is nothing revolutionary in that description. We could find similar passages throughout the Bible. In fact, we find a similar description in the alternative reading for this week, from the Gospel of Luke, in the song referred to as the Magnificat of Mary:

*[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

*[God] has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

*[God] has helped [God’s] servant Israel,
in remembrance of [God’s] mercy (1:52-54).*

One of the thorniest questions about the psalms, and the Bible in general, has been the exact meaning of the word “poor.” Some writers, preachers and scholars take “poor” to mean “humble.” Poverty, in this sense, is a spiritual condition and, perhaps, even a spiritual goal to pursue, to be “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3).

The trouble is, when we examine Psalm 146 more closely, the idea of poverty as a spiritual problem alone is the least likely conclusion. The psalms consistently describe material and economic poverty. Poverty isn’t something to be embraced, as some interpreters have believed. There is nothing holy about being in poverty; it’s something God is working to end.

That’s an important lesson for us today. Psalm 146 offers comfort to people who feel as if they have nowhere left to turn, people who, as theologian Howard Thurman wrote, live with their “backs against the wall.” Their comfort is God’s promise that one day their poverty will end, their hunger will be satisfied and the justice they seek will be found. This hope is grounded in faith that this is what God is like. Each of the groups mentioned in the psalm has been victimized and marginalized in society. Each lacks protection and opportunity. Each risks being further victimized by injustice. Yet, even as the community rejects them, God claims them for God’s own — because that is who God is. And that is who the church is called to be.

In Psalm 72, from the previous session, the psalmist uses praise of the king to subtly remind political rulers that their job is to pursue justice for people in need. Here the comforting promise of Psalm 146 reminds us that this work for the justice, liberation and security of our most vulnerable neighbors is also the calling of the church as we strive to be people of God in the world.

United4Rescue’s ship Sea-Eye 4 is part of this work and a symbol of safety and security for hundreds of migrants in the Mediterranean region. There are many reasons that refugees and migrants flee North Africa for Europe. Some are trying to escape violence and conflict. Others seek a new life without the threat of hunger or deep poverty. This much is true for all of them, though: the route across the Mediterranean is dangerous, and the decision to migrate is not made lightly. The United Nations reports that, since 2014, more than 24,000 migrants have been reported missing or dead while attempting the journey. Those who survive face additional risks. According to United4Rescue, many migrants and refugees are

detained by the Libyan Coast Guard and taken to Libya, a country that lacks an asylum program and legal protections against human rights abuses.

In June 2022, the *Sea-Eye 4* came to the aid of 63 people in distress, including 30 minors and a baby, as they tried to cross the Mediterranean in a rubber boat. Two days later, the *Sea-Eye 4* evacuated 290 people who had been huddled below-deck on an overcrowded wooden boat. That same day, the *Sea-Eye 4* and a Spanish vessel rescued 100 people from another rubber boat, including 17 who had jumped into the sea to avoid being taken by the Libyan Coast Guard.

Migrants and refugees are among the most vulnerable people in the world. The decision to migrate across land or sea is always risky, but for many, the risks of staying in their home communities can be equally high. Violence from war or crime, human rights abuses, hunger, poverty and lack of jobs can all push people to make the difficult choice. Even if they survive the journey, they often face increased risk of hunger, poverty and discrimination in their countries of arrival.

Our church has a long history of accompanying migrants and refugees, a history that continues today through ELCA World Hunger. This includes working with local communities to address the root causes of migration, working with partners to provide support as refugees and migrants resettle in new lands, and, through United4Rescue, ensuring that the journey is safe.

Psalm 146 is part of a long literary tradition in Holy Scripture testifying to God's concern for orphans, widows, strangers — for all those who live with heightened vulnerabilities. And it recalls to us our biblical ancestors who survived as refugees from Egypt and exiles in Babylon because of God, “who keeps faith forever” — especially in our distress.

Each day presents us with an endless supply of blog posts and podcasts telling us what it means to be people of God. Especially

during Advent, mass media can persuade us it means campaigning for nativity scenes to be erected in town squares or saying “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays.” But the psalmist reminds us that no plastic manger or “Jesus Is the Reason” bumper sticker comes close to what God calls the church to be. Yes, we are called to preach the good news and anticipate with excitement and hope the coming of the Christ child on Christmas morning. Psalm 146, though, reminds us what that good news really is: a promise of comfort and security for all of us who have been victimized, marginalized or locked out by our communities.

In Psalm 72, the promise of our deliverance when we are in need (verse 12) is a promise that God cares about our ability to thrive. The promise of redemption (verse 14) is a reassurance that God will liberate us from oppression. Our hope is grounded in faith in God, who, even now, is working to bring the fullness of liberation. That may not fit on a bumper sticker, but it is a promise worth yearning for — and good news worth sharing.

REFLECTION *Questions*

What do we learn about God from Psalm 146? How does this compare with what we learned from Psalm 72 in the previous session?

What realities might compel you to migrate from your home? What would be your biggest challenges?

Why do you think the psalmist mentions the specific groups in the psalms? What qualities might they share?

United4Rescue is a secular organization, though it was started by Protestant Christians. How might this work show God moving in today's world?

ADVENT

Session 4 — Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

“O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?” —Psalm 80:4



The train called “La Bestia” runs from Chiapas, in southern Mexico, to Mexico City, where it connects with freight and passenger lines heading toward the border with the United States. “The Beast” carries grain and other freight as it chugs north, but for years it has also carried migrants fleeing Central America for a new life in the United States. Adults and children perch on the train’s roof during the hazardous journey, which has earned the train a graver nickname: “el tren de la muerte” or “the train of death.”

Norma, a young mother from Honduras, fell from the train and lost her leg. She spent a month confined as she recovered enough to return home. “I understood in that time why that train was called [‘the great beast’],” she said. “Everyone fears him, the risks are so great amid the movement and height. It can take away your life and steal your dreams.”

Norma hails from Yoro in north central Honduras. “Living in this community is difficult because we lack electricity,” she explained. “There is no public transportation, and there are no businesses nearby where we can acquire the products we need.” Even if energy, transportation and quality goods were available, Norma and many

of her neighbors would have trouble affording them. In Yoro the only work available was farming, but even this is limited, since farmers must rent plots to plant. "Our reality is that we pay to work, and we pay to eat."

In our psalm for this week, we hear the plea of the people of God: "How long, O Lord?" They have been overrun by invading armies. The people have faced exile, and the cities have been destroyed. "How long?" they cry. The psalmist calls God "Shepherd of Israel," a name used only in the Hebrew Scriptures but one associated with the traditional image of God as the people's caretaker and vigilant protector. Their cry is an earnest plea and, perhaps, a subtle accusation. "Where are you, God?" The one who "lead[s] Joseph like a flock" (verse 1) has fed the hungry "with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure" (verse 5). They are vulnerable to their neighbors, and they beg, "Give us life!" (verse 18).

The waiting that characterized this season of Advent can build a quiet excitement for the coming of Christmas Day. We eagerly anticipate the birth of Jesus and the celebrations that accompany it. But for many of us, there comes a time when waiting for good news generates not quiet excitement but restless yearning, when patience has worn thin and waiting for the good news takes the form of an emotional plea: "How long, O Lord?"

For neighbors such as Norma, risking death and injury can sometimes seem like a better choice than waiting for the change they so need.

Over 38 million people in the United States aren't sure where their next meal will come from, and for as many as 811 million of our neighbors around the world, that next meal won't come at all. We must do more than counsel patience and wait for change. As war, disaster and economic downturns increase the number of hungry people worldwide, the church cannot reply, "Just wait."

When Norma returned to Honduras, she felt "shattered. . . . I wanted to die, because I had lost my leg and that limited my independence even more."

With the support of her family, Norma connected with the Comisión de Acción Social Menonita (Mennonite Social Action Committee, or CASM), a partner of ELCA World Hunger. CASM works with communities in Honduras to support returning migrants, providing education, vocational training and psychological support. For Norma, CASM "returned the hopes that I can continue ahead." Through CASM, she was able to get a prosthetic limb and establish a grocery store that will provide her with a new source of income and opportunity. Facing "the Beast" once seemed unavoidable, but now Norma reaches out to others to share her story and her hope that things can change.

We often use the word "waiting" to describe the mindset of Advent. But Norma's stories — and countless others — inspire us to view Advent not as a season of waiting and anticipating but as a season to remember the waiting of our neighbors — for the opportunity and support they need to build new lives, and for the time when they won't have to weigh the risks of leaving home or staying.

More than 95% of ELCA congregations participate in some form of hunger ministry. Through ELCA World Hunger, we unite our efforts to respond to hunger and poverty locally and globally. We do this because we know that we are invited to be part of God's active response to that plea, "How long, O Lord?" As Advent draws to a close, we trust through faith that, together, we can break the cycle of hunger. We remember the importance of this work today and into the future, trusting that God has equipped and invited us to be part of the good news of God's restoration of the world, so that the next time someone cries, "How long?" we might, as one people, respond, "No longer."



ELCA World Hunger

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