



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

December 11, 2011, Third Sunday in Advent

By Monica A. Coleman

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11
Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b–55
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
John 1:6–8, 19–28

Introduction

Like a hand lifted with fingers pointing outward and inward, this week's lectionary readings help the church think about the mission and life of prophets in the context of Advent. Isaiah describes the Suffering Servant's call to preach justice; Mary sings praise for the conception of Jesus. The Fourth Gospel describes John the Baptist as a prophet who joins Isaiah and Mary in shining light upon the larger work of God. The Psalm and Epistle remind us that the spiritual life of the prophets sustains them in living out the divine call. Moving attention away from the charisma of the prophet, these texts remind today's witnesses for justice that the work is really about God and justice (and not about the prophets), but the worker must be sustained through spiritual reflection.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

At the conclusion of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul turns to spiritual issues. This passage speaks powerfully to those who are actively engaged in the struggle for social justice in two ways.

First, justice workers are reminded to maintain their inner spiritual lives. There is so much work to do to realize justice. Yet the work must be undergirded by a living relationship with God. Paul encourages people to develop internal resources through prayer, gratitude, and rejoicing. We are encouraged to nourish our awareness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can operate both in the individual life and in the wider community. While the Spirit can work anytime on any day, people who work for justice often find that regular spiritual practices—such as Bible reading, small-group Bible studies, prayer, and partaking of the loaf and the cup—help them respond to the Spirit.

Second, this text reminds justice workers to rely on God for their inner and outer strength. The prayer at the end of this passage asks that God sanctify the Christian community and asserts that God is faithful and will maintain believers in a holistic manner (vv. 23–24). In Paul's context, sanctification means to be holy, and to be holy means to live in community according to the covenant. Thus the prayer for sanctification itself is a prayer for social justice.