

## WEEK 1: THE CANDLE OF *Hope*

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”. I wonder if your heart, like mine, has beat with the rhythms of this prayer as we watched the events of this year unfold? We heard of families in India struggling to feed their children during the lockdown, women in Bolivia trapped inside for months with abusive husbands, the neglect of the elderly in many Canadian facilities, the explosion in Beirut and the ugliness of racism being unveiled in our communities, our institutions and our own hearts. And of course, we have held our personal grief deep in our bones as we struggled to respond to so much calamity. Oh Lord. Have mercy. Come.

Contrary to the cheery glow our culture associates with the month leading up to Christmas, the Christian tradition has always made space for aching hearts and weary souls in the weeks leading up to the celebration of Christ’s birth. The traditional passages chosen for this week of Advent resound with a heart-cry for the presence of God in times of suffering. Instead of the forced optimism we often mistake for hope, our faith makes room for hope that flickers alongside tears. Hope that struggles, like a pale green point, to emerge from ashes. Hope that mysteriously multiplies in the dark places and hope that invites us into abundance and generosity in landscapes of scarcity.

This cry, recorded by the prophet Isaiah, comes from such a place. After years of living in Babylonian captivity, a faithful remnant of Israelites had returned home to Jerusalem only to find a reality that did not match the dazzling promises God had made to them. Where was the restoration that they longed for? Where was the God that had revealed his power and presence to their ancestors? In the face of crisis, the Israelites acknowledged that they had come to the end of their own resources. Confessing the many ways they had fallen short they appealed to the only thing that remained: The generous grace of their Father and source of their hope.

During our CBM staff chapel in August, we lamented with our colleagues in Lebanon about the increasingly difficult economic, health and political situation in the country. Together we prayed for restoration. A few hours later, the Beirut explosion obliterated much of the city along with many lives. Elie Haddad, CBM Team Leader of the MENA region writes, “The question that keeps lingering in our minds is: Where is God in all of this? Where is God in this senseless pain and preventable suffering?... “How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?””<sup>1</sup> Looking at the rubble, Elie points to the ways God has answered that question. “I can see God in the goodness of countless Lebanese who took to the streets to clean, help, feed, and comfort the distressed.” He also sees God in the transformation of the Lebanese church from a quiet observer in times of crisis to a responsive, frontline expression of Jesus’ love. And finally, Elie points to God’s love, poured out in prayer, donations and care from partners around the world. In a context of great scarcity, the abundant generosity of God has been revealed and hope continues to grow.

The image of the Saviour at the core of this passage is an ordinary potter. It is the image of an artist who transforms clay – dirt – into beautiful serving dishes. It is the image of our hope and our invitation into abundance and generosity.

As we prepare our hearts for the birth of Christ this year, there is space to cry out in lament for all that has been lost. Things are not as they ought to be. We are not as we ought to be. And yet, we do not live in scarcity. Our generous Creator takes our broken pieces and forms us into beautiful vessels capable of great generosity in times of crisis. Flickering hope is fanned into bright flame.

Prayer:

Creator, we long for you to make all things new. Our hearts and spirits are weary after the year we have walked through. The horizon ahead is unclear and we cannot always see what you are doing. Yet because of your generous grace and love, our hope is not lost in the dirt and dust. We are the clay and you are our potter. We trust our lives and our world to your artist hands.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.