



GSR in the Classroom: ADVENT

LESSON – FINDING COMPLICITY AND CONNECTION IN OUR COMMON CHALLENGES

SUMMARY: A sister discovers that she's not free, at least not from a share of responsibility for ways that our planet and its people have been hurt. But she's also not alone. We are each other's keepers, and God is with us all.

BEFORE YOU READ:

Advent is a time to be more aware as we prepare for the coming of God among us. How can we prepare? Alone, or with a partner, consider:

- What needs to change in my life so that I can encounter Jesus more freely?
- What habits, worries or sins distract me or hold my mind captive?

Keep in mind while you read:

The author becomes aware of problems that surround her and how she is complicit in them. She also becomes aware of the people around her and how they can come together and be responsible for each other.



O COME EMMANUEL: FREE US PRISONERS

BY JULIA WALSH

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Sitting next to me in another hard, plastic chair is a good-hearted man wearing brightly colored scrubs — colors that label him as guilty of a crime. We're in a florescent lit room inside the county jail: bare white walls and glass windows, a camera overhead.

There are about a dozen of us in this circle, praying with Advent Scriptures. Messages of waiting, anticipation, expectation are read aloud. Then we discuss, consider: What does it mean to be people of

hope? How does hope influence their life inside these walls, even while separated from their children? *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

At a glance, most observers might assume that I'm the only free person in the room. That as a visitor and minister, I'm able to enjoy liberty and live as I wish, in ways that align with the Gospel. But in the following days, the Spirit reminds me I'm not free.

After visiting the jail, I run an errand and pick up a donation of coffee for the spirituality center where I'm on staff. Wanting to express my gratitude to the business and be a good neighbor, I make a purchase. The cookie comes in a sheet of disposable plastic. The cup of coffee is also disposable, served in a Styrofoam cup with a plastic cover.

As I gobble up the cookie and gulp down the coffee with gladness, I barely think about the impacts of my consumption. The coffee traveled thousands of miles so I could get a late-afternoon caffeine kick. How much energy did it take to grow the coffee, to brew it? To make the plastic sheet? The cup? All so I could enjoy a 10-minute break in my day, then dispose of waste that will never decay, that will remain on Earth forever? *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

In the jail, a man read the Word of God aloud to us. We held our crinkled white pages in our hands as we listened. I thought of how I didn't know the people with me in the room too well, and they didn't know me. Yet, we are bound by our shared humanity, our shared struggle to become better people.

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brothers, about one another, that you may not be judged. Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates. Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

—James 5:7-10

I told the men that I'm a sinner too. I admitted I get frustrated with people when they don't do things like I think they ought to be done. I asked them to pray for me, so that I can better heed the words of Scripture and not judge my neighbors, not complain. I know I'm

VOCABULARY

complicity: Involvement with others in doing wrong

Emmanuel: A name for Jesus that means "God is with us"

called to embrace diversity, to be patient, to love. But I fail every day. Later, I'm judgmental — and practically furious — when another member of my parish wants to convince me that Pope Francis is wrong, that capitalism is good and that climate change is a sham. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

Days later, I am watching "60 Minutes" with my housemates. It's an occasional Sunday night dinner ritual: We consume our locally-sourced home-cooked meal right along with an expansion of global consciousness. This time, the main course seems to be the horror of the plastics in the ocean. I feel sick as I learn how remote beaches are littered with garbage that has floated there from across the globe, from places thousands of miles away. I see pictures of the world's garbage swirling in the water like a bizarre chemical soup. I see images of dead birds, their flesh and skeletons, decaying — in the gaps that would have



ALBATROSS CHICK, 2009, MIDWAY ATOLL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
[U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE/CHRIS JORDAN]

been their bellies are piles of brightly colored plastic.

Later that night, it crosses my mind: I don't know how to go through my day without using plastic. I use a plastic toothbrush, a plastic rosary, a plastic light switch. All my cosmetics come in plastic containers. I brush my hair with plastic. I wear plastic glasses. I even use a plastic lighter to ignite the candle in my prayer corner. Plastic has always been part of my life. I don't know how to resist this system, how to strip myself from cooperation with the evil of waste and destruction. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

At times, our consciousness of systemic problems can be overwhelming. We all feel frozen in our fear, we are stalled from responding with compassion. We can feel powerless, trapped. We may decide to ignore the issues or convince ourselves we bear no responsibility. It's easy to doubt and become cynical: How could each of us possibly cause a positive change, when the problems are so immense? When the problems of this planet are complex and enormous, it is easy to become numb, still. It is natural to ignore and continue onward in our comfort zones, without our lifestyles and hearts and minds being disturbed.

Despite our opposition, we participate in the oppression, hurting other people and the planet. The systems of our global society hold us all prisoner. Not one of us is completely free. But we are made to be each other's keepers, God made us for each other. We are all called to communion with the goodness of creation, even the seabirds who die on beaches, their bellies full of plastic. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*

In the jail, the man sitting next to me in another hard, plastic chair speaks about what it's like to be locked inside, and how he remains hopeful. His face is kind, encouraging. *I am learning to be patient and humble. I am more deeply understanding what these words mean.*

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

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AFTER YOU READ:

As the story progressed, the author became more aware of several things, including:

- How her use of plastics makes her complicit in environmental degradation.
- How everyone, to some extent, is complicit in situations that hurt the planet or its people.
- How we are responsible for each other, and that God is with us in our struggles.

Alone, or with a partner, consider:

- Are you, like the author, overwhelmed sometimes by the extent of problems in our world? Explain.
- How might you find hope so that you're not stalled from responding to these challenges?

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT: The prophet Isaiah gives hope to God's people in turbulent times in this passage that we often hear in the Advent season:

“Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: Ask for a sign from the Lord, your God; let it be deep as Sheol, or high as the sky! But Ahaz answered, “I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!”

Then he said: Listen, house of David! Is it not enough that you weary human beings? Must you also weary my God? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel.”

Isaiah 7:10-14

Alone or with a partner, consider:

- Ahaz didn't even ask God for a sign. Does God give us signs that aren't requested? Give some examples. What signs might God be offering you this Advent?
- What signs does God give people that the earth is in crisis? How might your faith empower you to join with others, like teen environmental activist Greta Thunberg, to care for our common home?
- What does God's presence, through the sign of the Son, mean as we approach overwhelming problems such as environmental degradation?

THE CHURCH'S CALL

Nearly two decades ago, Pope John Paul II alerted us that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices, but also by a lack of respect for nature. He wrote:

“Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone. When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely, that there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations.

I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue. Even men and women without any particular religious conviction, but with an acute sense of their responsibilities for the common good, must recognize their obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment. ...They need but realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.”

Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation, Pope John Paul II, 1990

Reflection Questions:

- How can the ecological crisis fuel violence and threaten world peace?
- How can companies and governments reverse unhealthy ecological habits to preserve the earth for future generations?
- How can people change their lifestyles in ways to protect our common home?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Advent is a time to slow down and spend time with Jesus, and one great way to do this is the prayer practice of [Perpetual Adoration](#), or ‘round-the-clock prayer. It is a way to stay aware of God’s presence in our lives by praying before the Blessed Sacrament.

Sr. Julia Walsh’s congregation, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, has prayed continuously, day and night, in LaCrosse Wisconsin, since 1878. You can submit a prayer request to the sisters through <https://www.fspa.org/prayer-request.php>. Learn more about the practice here, or better yet, spend a quiet hour in your church this Advent praying before the Eucharist.



ACT

For one week during Advent, invite your family to participate in a “plastic waste inventory.” Explore ways to reduce waste and create a recycling program in your home.

This inventory can help determine the amount and types of plastic that your household uses. What you learn may surprise you. For seven days, record the following:

- How many people comprise your immediate family (household)?
- How many plastic shopping bags will your family acquire in one week?
- How many plastic bottles (water, soft drinks, etc.) will your family drink in a week?
How many plastic straws will your family use in a week?

At the end of the week, examine your data. Observe the trends in your family’s waste habits. For example, your data might show that your family drank 20 bottles of liquid in one day. If so, you may explore ways to cut back on bottled beverages.

With Christmas coming up, consider sharing gifts with your family that are good for the environment. These might include:

- Reusable bags, enough to handle a week’s worth of groceries
- Reusable produce bags
- Plastic-free toothbrushes
- Metal straws
- Stainless steel water bottles

PRAY

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Guide us as we seek to discover you in the many signs of the season.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Guide us as we seek to embrace diversity and welcome those in need.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Guide us as we remain hopeful in the midst of the chaos of our hurting and broken world.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Guide us as we seek to recognize your movement in those caring for our common home.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Guide us as we face the pressures, anxieties and troubles of life.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Guide us in our endeavors to stand on the side of justice and truth.

Amen.