

Human Degradation and Spirituality for a New Humanity

Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we present to you this liturgical year's series of Sunday School, starting with the Advent and Christmas Season.

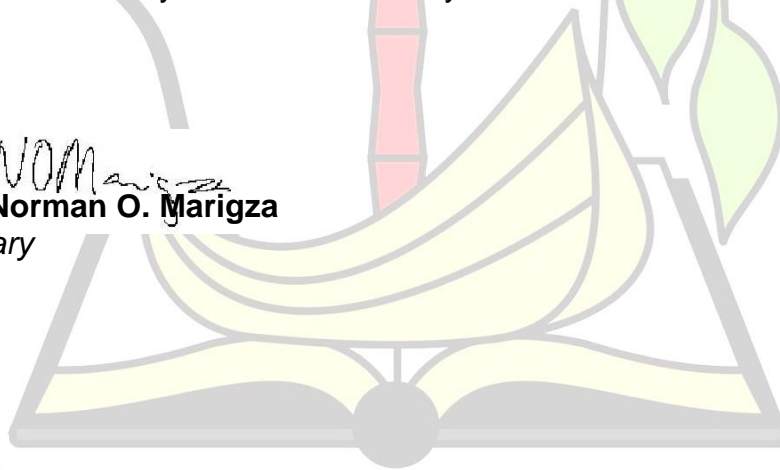
We are grateful to the pool of writers who have worked doubly hard to come up with the lessons, knowing of our hope and desire that these materials can be uploaded early enough so that they can be translated into the three major Philippine languages: **Iloco**, the language spoken most widely in the North; **Bisaya** (Cebuano) which is most widely spoken in the Visayas and Mindanao, and **Tagalog**, which is most widely spoken in the Central and South Luzon areas. Thus, we are also grateful to our Translator Teams who bring the lessons to the language most understood by the people on the pews. We also thank Ms. Melinda Grace Aoanan, who shepherded the entire process.

We learn that one of the factors why the early Church was dynamic was that members devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). They were grounded on the Word and established in the faith (Col. 2:7). But we should also know the condition of our communities, our society and our world upon which the Good News is to be shared. One theologian (attributed to Karl Barth) puts it this way: have the Bible on one hand and the newspaper on the other. Or as one former General Secretary (Bishop Mercurio Serenia) loved to say, "faithful to the text and sensitive to the context." In this way, our study of God's Word becomes relevant in our time.

We commend these Sunday School lessons to you.

In Christ,


Bishop Reuel Norman O. Marigza
General Secretary



Introduction

Why do we need to highlight human degradation as a sub-theme for this quadrennium? Why do we need to study it in Sunday School? How degraded is humanity? Why do we need a 'new humanity'? What is wrong with the present humanity? Genesis 1: 27 says: So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them [NRSV, paraphrased].

We have a new president who is relatively radical. The last SONA might as well have been the first SONA where people gathered to show support for the presidency instead of being a protest rally. People say he has accomplished much more in his first one hundred days than his predecessor has done in all his six-year term.

We are in this crux of our history where many things can happen. The hastening of change favorable to the majority of the Filipino people can happen. This of course is not dependent on a president. This can only depend on you and I and the millions of masses clamoring for change. The one who sits at the helm of government can only be a secondary force in this fight for change. So let us work for change. Let us teach and preach and work for the hastening of the Kingdom of God.

What needs changing? Let us take a look around us.

And God created humankind in God's image....

How are our farmers?

Perhaps we can still remember the massacre of farmers that happened in Kidapawan on April 1 last year. If they are created in the image of God, is it okay that bullets are rained on them while protesting because they and their families are hungry? Is it okay that they go hungry to the point where they need to protest? They who toil long hours just so we can have food on our table do not have food on theirs. Why are our farmers going hungry?

Our country's natural resources can support the whole Philippine population many times over and through several hundreds of years, and yet we remain to be a third-world country. We have so many fish in our seas and rivers but the catch of our local fisherfolk have been dwindling year after year. Why is that? Japanese companies have been trawling our waters for years now, leaving next to nothing for our fisherfolk with their simple nets and fishing gear. Our farmers do not have enough land to till because land-grabbing continues. The call of the farmers still is land to the tillers; ninety percent of them are landless. Farmers and fisherfolk are the top two sectors with the highest poverty incidence. No matter how hard they work, they remain the poorest in the country due to landlessness and lack of government support. They are victims of human rights violations. The socio-economic system prevailing in the countryside perpetuate this deprived state of the rural sector, keeping the national economy from reaching its full potential. Is this the image of God? Farmers can only realize full

agricultural productivity if genuine agrarian reform coupled with national industrialization will take place.

How about the workers?

Workers still continue to call for a significant wage increase in the form of a 125-peso across-the-board nationwide hike. They have been clamoring for this for at least a decade now. They also continue to call for good quality jobs. Seven in every 10 so-called employed are in jobs that are precarious, and low-paying. Is this the image of God?

How about our IP sisters and brothers?

Lumád and other IP communities strongly resisting encroachment of extractive and agribusiness companies into their ancestral lands are targeted by military and paramilitary groups. The military will continue to harass and threaten the IPs. IP communities protect many ancestral lands, one of the few remaining biodiversity areas with old growth forest that house rare species of flora and fauna. These areas are the best spots to extract gold, nickel, and copper. Ninety-seven percent of mineral production is brought out of the country. Despite the billions amassed from the mining industry in the Philippines, Lumád and other IP communities are not benefited, even with basic social services such as education and health. Is this the image of God? The present set-up of the mining industry only benefits imperialist countries at the expense of indigenous peoples and the environment. The Lumad stand firm in their position not to allow mining and logging companies to operate within their ancestral land. Organized IPs from the Cordilleras to Mindanao demand to nationally industrialize the mining industry as a step forward in developing other important national industries that truly serve the Filipino people. They assert their right to their ancestral domain and their right to self-determination.

Not only indigenous peoples are affected by mining and logging activities. These irresponsible extractive businesses ravage the environment, affecting all of us. Is this the image of God?

We see such a grim picture of our present national situation. What are we to do? As a church, what is our role in all these?

The Challenge

"The Spirit of God is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

[Luke 4: 18, 19, NRSV]

The Spirit of God is upon me....

What does it mean when we have the Spirit of God upon us? What is it in God's Spirit that pushes us to do what we need to do? What moves, what drives the Spirit of God is the Will of God. The Will of God for the people of God is life in all its fullness: freedom, equitable sharing, dignity, genuine love for one another; the absence of oppression and exploitation. When we say that the Spirit of God is upon us, it means that our will is aligned to the will of God. It means that life in all its fullness for everyone and not just for some is also our aim.

God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor

What is good news to the poor? A life free from the fetters of poverty, hunger, depravation; land for the tiller, dignity of labor, food; being able to provide for one's family—that is good news to the poor. We must educate our constituents, conscientize the masses that this situation, their situation, runs counter to the will of God. They must wake up to the truth that their suffering is due to an unjust system where only a powerful few benefit from the world's riches.

God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

This is truly good news to the political prisoners whose only "misdeed" is that they choose to serve their fellow human beings who need their help and advocacy the most.

Recovery of sight to the blind

For those who are physically blind, healing is truly good news and a welcome relief. For those who insist on being blind to the realities of our time, it is our responsibility to help them open their eyes to the truth of our present situation and mobilize them to participate in God's mission.

To let the oppressed go free...

As Christians, as followers of Christ, it is our responsibility to ensure that the Will of God will prevail over all the earth. But this does not mean that we are the answers to the problems, that the church has the solution to what ails society. Let us not be messianic, triumphalist and chauvinist.

...To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.


The time of the coming of God's salvation lies in God's hands; the answers lie in the hands of the oppressed masses who suffer the most in the present status quo. Those who live and suffer and are concretely in the midst of the struggle, in them lie the answers. In the midst of suffering, God is with them. In the midst of struggle, God is with them. God is always with them.

God wants for God's people that they be the charters and crafters of their own destiny—the destiny of freedom, of equitable sharing of resources, of each one's full participation in the shaping of a just society.

What is Our Role and Our Response?

We must always be critical in discerning the signs of the times. Each one of us must be an instrument for change. We must be true followers of Christ and emulate his example of genuine love and compassion for his fellow human beings, denouncing those who oppress and take advantage of others. And through these Sunday School materials, we must educate and empower each other for these tasks. Let us not allow this present dispensation to continue: that there are a few who enjoy the bounty of the land while countless others are desolate and hungry. Let us not allow the greedy and powerful few to trample upon our rights and rob us of the riches God has bestowed upon us. Let us listen to the cries of the suffering and struggling poor. Let us be one with them in their struggle. Let us be in solidarity with them, journeying with them towards a life that is full and free.

With this prescriptive Spirituality can we confront and survive these critical times and journey together towards becoming a New Humanity. For sure that in this great mission that is itself God's mission, we journey with God, as God is always with us, Immanuel.


Ms. Melinda Grace B. Aoanan
National Coordinator
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Calendar of Lessons

For Liturgical Year 2016-2017, the lessons are subdivided into these four scopes and strands:

- Scope 1: **Rootedness**
Strand 1: ***Jesus' Encounters with Human Degradation and its Transformations***
 - Advent and Christmastide (27 November 2016 – 1 January 2017)
 - Epiphany (8 January – 26 February 2017)
- Scope 2: **Identity: On Being and Becoming**
Strand 2: ***Jesus' Choice of the Kind of Messiah***
 - Lent (5 March – 9 April 2017)
 - Eastertide (16 April – 28 May 2017)
- Scope 3: **Unity and Solidarity**
Strand 3: ***The Church United to Respond to Human Degradation***
 - ***Pentecost (4 June – 20 August 2017)***
- Scope 4: **Fruitful Lifeworks**
Strand 4: ***The Church Manifesting the Marks of a Christ-like Life***
 - Kingdomtide (27 August – 26 November 2017)

Quadrennial Theme: Spirituality for These Critical TimesYear 3 Theme: **Human Degradation and Spirituality for a New Humanity 2016-2017**Scope 1: **Rootedness**Strand 1: ***Jesus' Encounters with Human Degradation and its Transformations***

Included Sundays for Advent and Christmastide Season (6 lessons)	Celebration	Lectionary Title	Scriptural References	General Concept
(1) November 27, 2016	First Sunday of Advent	Liberating Cultural Breakthroughs	1 Samuel 25:13-34 Matthew 1:18-24	There are cultural practices and beliefs that cause human suffering and degradation, thus, the church should make a cultural breakthrough in the transformation towards a new humanity.
(2) December 4, 2016	Second Sunday of Advent/Family Sunday	Seeds of New Humanity	Isaiah. 7:14 Luke 1:26-35	Like the enslaved people in Egypt, the new humanity emerges from among the victims who long for freedom and wholeness.
(3) December 11, 2016	Third Sunday of Advent/Human Rights Sunday	Challenging Oppressive State Powers	1 Kings 12:1-16 Luke 2:1-6	The church has the duty to expose and challenge state policies that violate human rights.
(4) December 18, 2016	Fourth Sunday of Advent	Jesus as God's Love Incarnate	Isaiah 49:1-3 John 3:11-17	In the midst of a broken humanity, God came in Jesus

				to mend it and make it whole.
(5) December 25, 2016	First Sunday after Christmas	The Birth of Jesus	Psalms 91:11 Luke 2:7-18 John 1:14	We joyfully celebrate the birth of Jesus in a world that longs for fullness.
(6) January 1, 2017	First Sunday after Christmas	Defending Children, Symbols of a New Beginning	Isaiah 43:18-19 Matthew 2:1-16	Upholding the rights and welfare of children makes a just and compassionate society now and in the future.
Included Sundays for Epiphany Season (8 lessons)	Celebration	Lectionary Title	Scriptural References	General Concept
(7) January 8, 2017	Epiphany Sunday	Channels of God's Healing	2 Kings 7:1-16 John 9:1-41	We are all healers to one another.
(8) January 15, 2017	First Sunday after Epiphany/Christian Unity	The Inclusive Healing Ministry of the Church	2 Kings 5:1-19 Mark 1:29-31	"The kingdom of God is present...where healing is given to the sick." (UCCP Statement of Faith)
(9) January 22, 2017	Second Sunday after Epiphany/National Bible Sunday	Healing of Animosities	Isaiah 11:1-9 Galatians 3:28	Respecting and appreciating differences is a condition for creative unity and harmony.
(10) January 29, 2017	Third Sunday after Epiphany	Healing as a Message of Salvation	2 Kings 4:8-37 Luke 8:41-56	Salvation comes whenever healing happens.
(11) February 5, 2017	Fourth Sunday after Epiphany	Healing of Social Divides	Ruth 1:1-21 Luke 13:10-17	Social division is eradicated when human fellowship, care, respect,

				and dignity are restored.
(12) February 12, 2017	Fifth Sunday after Epiphany	Healing of Broken Relationships	Genesis 32:1-32, 33:1-4 Matthew 5:24	Where there are broken relationships, it is the duty of the church to bring about reconciliation through forgiveness and repentance.
(13) February 19, 2017	Sixth Sunday after Epiphany	Healing from Demon Possession	1 Samuel 16:14-23 Mark 5:1-20	The Spirit of God drives away the demons of envy, fear, and greed for the Spirit to dwell in.
(14) February 26, 2017	Seventh Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration Sunday	Healing towards Transformation	Exodus 34:29-35 Mark 9:2-8	The transfiguration of Jesus is a preview of his resurrection which is our hope and destiny.

Scope 2: **Identity: On Being and Becoming**
 Strand 2: ***Jesus' Choice of the Kind of Messiah***

Included Sundays for Lent (6 lessons)	Celebration	Lectionary Title	Scriptural References	General Concept
(15) March 5, 2017	First Sunday in Lent	Choosing our Destiny	Jeremiah 1:4-10 Matthew 16:21-23	Jesus chose to obey God's will and it became his destiny. When we make a choice to follow Jesus, it becomes our destiny.

(16) March 12, 2017	Second Sunday in Lent	Servant Messiah	Isaiah 53:4-6 Mark 10:42-45	As a servant messiah, Jesus served the suffering ones. As a result, he suffered with them. When we serve the suffering ones, we also suffer with them.
(17) March 19, 2017	Third Sunday in Lent	Loyalty to God	Ruth 1:16-17 Luke 7:1-10	The love for God is the basis of our unwavering loyalty to God.
(18) March 26, 2017	Fourth Sunday in Lent	Peace-building	Jeremiah 1:9-10 Matthew 10:34	Building peace, as a messianic mission, requires forcible removal of obstacles to peace—inequitable distribution of resources, abusive relationships, and injustice.
(19) April 2, 2017	Fifth Sunday in Lent	Marks of the True Messiah	Isaiah 42:1-7 Matthew 11:2-6	The true messiah is known through his healing, liberating, and restoring deeds.
(20) April 9, 2017	Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday	Jesus Encountering the Powers	Zechariah 9:9-10 John 12:12-19	Jesus enters Jerusalem to challenge the powers-that-be that cause human misery.

Included Sundays for Eastertide (7 lessons)	Celebration	Lectionary Title	Scriptural References	General Concept
(21) April 16, 2017	Resurrection Sunday	Resurrection of the Righteous	Daniel 12:1-3 John 11:25-27 Romans 6:5	Those who remain faithful to the end will not perish but have eternal life.
(22) April 23, 2017	First Sunday after Resurrection	Suppressing the Truth of the Resurrection	Jeremiah 28:15-17 Matthew 28:11-15	The response of the powers-that-be to the resurrection was to cover up the truth with a lie and criminalize those who believe.
(23) April 30, 2017	Second Sunday after Resurrection	Moment of Human Frailties	2 Samuel 21:10 Mark 16:1-8	After Jesus died, the disciples experienced a lacuna moment of mourning, confusion, fear, depression, and disbelief. This experience is not sin but needs to be accepted and brought to the Lord.
(24) May 7, 2017	Third Sunday after Resurrection	Appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene	2 Kings 7:7-20 Mark 16:9-11	The testimony of those who speak the truth are often discredited on account of their status in society.
(25) May 14, 2017	Fourth Sunday after Resurrection	Failure to Recognize the Appearance of Jesus	Genesis 18:1-15 Mark 16:12-13	Due to their extreme grief, the disciples were not able

				to apprehend the risen Lord. But Jesus overcomes our failure to discern and communes with us.
(26) May 21, 2017	Fifth Sunday after Resurrection/UC CP Sunday	Celebrating the Resurrection	Exodus 16:1-26 Luke 24:36-46	Jesus comes to commune with us in ordinary, basic, and common activities and struggles.
(27) May 28, 2017	Sixth Sunday after Resurrection/Ascension Sunday	Anticipating the Fullness of God's Reign on Earth	Daniel 12:13 Mark 16:15-20	Jesus ascends to heaven to receive God's authority to realize God's reign in its fullness.

Scope 3: **Unity and Solidarity**Strand 3: ***The Church United to Respond to Human Degradation***

Included Sundays for Pentecost Season (12 lessons)	Celebration	Lectionary Title	Scriptural References	General Concept
(28) June 4, 2017	Pentecost Sunday	The Spirit Breaking through Cultural Captivity	Joel 2:28-29 Acts 2:1-12	The Spirit enables the Gospel to be communicated in the languages and cultures of the people.
(29) June 11, 2017	First Sunday after Pentecost/Trinity Sunday	The Holy Trinity in the Faith of the Church	Genesis 1:26-27 Jude vv. 19:21	God is a community of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the source and basis of the

				church as community.
(30) June 18, 2017	Second Sunday after Pentecost	The Holy Spirit Sustaining the Church	Jeremiah 7:1-11 Matthew 23:13-28	The Holy Spirit bids the church to unite with the people to confront the oppressive powers.
(31) June 25, 2017	Third Sunday after Pentecost	Defending the Powerless	Psalms 82:3-4; 146:5-9 Proverbs 31:8-9 James 1:27	The Holy Spirit sustains the church in its ministry of protecting the oppressed and the helpless and upholding their rights.
(32) July 2, 2017	Fourth Sunday after Pentecost	Breaking Down Walls that Divide	Isaiah 56:3-8 Amos 9:7 Luke 14:12-14	The church, by nature, is inclusive. It embraces differences and does not harbor animosities.
(33) July 9, 2017	Fifth Sunday after Pentecost	Confronting Human Greed	Deuteronomy 5:21 Acts 2:44-47; 4:33-35	The church confronts the issue of human greed which is the root of many evils and broken relationships.
(34) July 16, 2017	Sixth Sunday after Pentecost	Casting Out Demonic Powers	Psalms 103:2-5 Mark 1:23-27; 7:24-30	The church's ministry of healing requires the driving out of demonic powers that hold people in their sway.
(35) July 23, 2017	Seventh Sunday after Pentecost	Being Present	Deuteronomy 31:8 Psalm 40:1-3 Revelation 21:3-4	The church embraces the ministry of presence to embody God who is Immanuel.

(36) July 30, 2017	Eighth Sunday after Pentecost	Nurturing Hope	Job 5:15-16 Psalm 34:17-20 Matthew 11:28-30	The church journeys with people in the darkness of despair, reviving the hope and keeping it alive.
(37) August 6, 2017	Ninth Sunday after Pentecost	Reaching Out to Victims of Abuse and Social Evils	Isaiah 25:4 Matthew 18:21-35	The church is a community that provides comfort, assistance, shelter, and intervention to victims in their needs.
(38) August 13, 2017	Tenth Sunday after Pentecost	Pursuing and Building Peace	Psalm 34:11-14 1Peter 3:8-12	The church plants peace in a world rocked by conflict, violence, and wars.
(39) August 20, 2017	Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost	The Church Awakened to Do Mission	Isaiah 59:17 Ephesians 6:14	An awakened church girds up and equips itself for mission.

Scope 4: **Fruitful Lifeworks**Strand 4: ***The Church Manifesting the Marks of a Christ-like Life***

Included Sundays for Kingdomtide Season (14 lessons)	Celebration	Lectionary Title	Scriptural References	General Concept
(40) August 27, 2017	First Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Mission Sunday	Leaving Everything to Follow Christ	Isaiah 6:1-8 Luke 5:1-11	Obedience to Jesus means letting go of those cares that keep us from following him.
(41) September 3, 2017	Second Sunday in Kingdomtide/ CEN Sunday	Mission to the Periphery	1 Samuel 18:1-5 Philippians 2:5-8 2 Corinthians 8:9	Removing our self from the center of our life so that we can put others in its place.
(42) September 10, 2017	Third Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Children' Sunday	Humility-Powered Mission	Proverbs 15:33, 11:2 Luke 18:9-14	Behind genuine mission is a humble heart that seeks the well-being of others.
(43) September 17, 2017	Fourth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Youth Sunday	Accountability in the Kingdom	2 Samuel 12:1-13 Luke 15:11-24	Being created in the image of God, we are responsible and accountable to each other.
(44) September 24, 2017	Fifth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Fellowship of the Least Coin Sunday	The Kingdom as a Forgiving Community	Genesis 45:1-5 Acts 7:59-60	Being forgiving is a quality of those who belong to the Kingdom of God.
(45) October 1, 2017	Sixth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Worldwide Communion Sunday/CYAP Sunday	Towards a Reconciled Community	Genesis 45:9-15 Philemon 1:10-20	True reconciliation moves relationships to a higher plane.
(46) October 8, 2017	Seventh Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Peace Sunday	Living the Faith	Esther 4:13-16 James 1:27	Forgiven and reconciled, we

				are freed to do good.
(47) October 15, 2017	Eighth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ UCM Sunday	Being Accepted in the Kingdom of God	Hosea 1: 1-3, 3:1 John 4:7-15	The Christian community is accepting of others unmindful of any advantage.
(48) October 22, 2017	Ninth Sunday in Kingdomtide/Solidarity with Indigenous People Sunday	Reverence for Life	Exodus 2:1-10 Luke 7:1-10	Life is respected beyond social class, ethnicity, and religion.
(49) October 29, 2017	Tenth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Reformation Sunday	Discerning God's Ways through Jesus	Job 42:1-6 John 14:5-11	To know Jesus is to know God. The gospel makes faith simple to everyone.
November 5, 2017 (50)	Eleventh Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Church Workers Sunday	Prayerful Life	Daniel 6:6-23 Mark 14:32-38	Communing with God through prayers encompasses all of life.
(51) November 12, 2017	Twelfth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Theological Education Sunday	Audacious Compassion	1 Kings 17:8-16 Luke 10:25-37	Those who have less in life or regarded low are the most compassionate.
(52) November 19, 2017	Thirteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Migrant Workers Sunday	Learning from the Faith and Witness of Migrants	Psalms 137:1-6 1 Peter 1:1 James 1:1-4	Being steadfast in the faith makes us complete and whole.
(53) November 26, 2017	Fourteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide/ Stewardship Sunday	Service Motivated by Love	Judges 5:6-13 Mark 2:1-12	Stewardship is manifested through the collective response of the faith community.

Quadrennial Theme: **SPIRITUALITY FOR THESE CRITICAL TIMES**Year 3 Theme: **Human Degradation and Spirituality for a New Humanity CC 2016-2017**Scope 1: ***Rootedness in the Faith***Strand 1: ***Jesus' Encounters with Human Degradation and its Transformation***Season: ***Advent and Christmastide***Age Level: ***Adults*****November 27, 2016**First Sunday of Advent: **Liberating Cultural Breakthroughs*****Old Testament: 1 Samuel 25:13-34***

13David said to his men, 'Every man strap on his sword!' And every one of them strapped on his sword; David also strapped on his sword; and about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage.

14 But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, 'David sent messengers out of the wilderness to salute our master; and he shouted insults at them. 15Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we never missed anything when we were in the fields, as long as we were with them; 16they were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. 17Now therefore know this and consider what you should do; for evil has been decided against our master and against all his house; he is so ill-natured that no one can speak to him.'

18 Then Abigail hurried and took two hundred loaves, two skins of wine, five sheep ready dressed, five measures of parched grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs. She loaded them on donkeys 19and said to her young men, 'Go on ahead of me; I am coming after you.' But she did not tell her husband Nabal. 20As she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, David and his men came down towards her; and she met them. 21Now David had said, 'Surely it was in vain that I protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; but he has returned me evil for good. 22God do so to David and more also, if by morning I leave as much as one male of all who belong to him.'

23 When Abigail saw David, she hurried and alighted from the donkey, and fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground. 24She fell at his feet and said, 'Upon me alone, my lord, be the guilt; please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. 25My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent.

26 'Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from blood-guilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. 27And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. 28Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you as long as you live. 29If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he

shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. 30When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, 31my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.'

32 David said to Abigail, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! 33Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from blood-guilt and from avenging myself by my own hand! 34For as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal as much as one male.'

New Testament: Matthew 1:18-24

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' 22All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' 24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

General Concept: There are cultural practices and beliefs that cause human suffering and degradation, thus, the church should make a cultural breakthrough in the transformation towards a new humanity.

Key Concept: (Adults)

Jesus enjoins the adults to be part of the transformation of human beings through cultural breakthroughs.

Exegesis of the Biblical References

The story narrated in the text of 1 Samuel 25: 13-34 talks of the successful attempt of Abigail to defuse a situation in her own family and community that could have exploded into a very violent incident. It could have cost the lives of many people including her own husband Nabal. This is because of the fugitive David's very angry reaction to the response of Nabal to his request for a little share of the goods that Nabal, a rich man, had. Nabal owned several thousands of sheep and goats in his own territory in Carmel where they were shearing sheep at that time. David claims that he had been providing some measure of security and protection for Nabal and his people out in the fields with the flocks and herd. David was simply making a modest request in behalf of his own men who, owing to their fugitive situation, were being sustained only by the generosity of people in various communities that they pass through. They have been running and hiding from the forces of King Saul who were out to kill David for being a threat to his hold on the throne of Israel. David wanted an expression of support and care from people like Nabal who has everything and very much in a position to give even a small part of his livestock.

In rage because of the rejection made by Nabal, David immediately ordered his men to attack the camp of Nabal and inflict a bloody response to Nabal and his people. It was Abigail however who prevented this bloody encounter between David and Nabal by immediately going to David with a load of goods that she brought to David to appease his anger. She humbled herself and tactfully and diplomatically pleaded before David in behalf of her husband. This act of Abigail, for a woman to go out of her way, humble herself before a man and personally plead in behalf of her own husband, is something unprecedented in the ancient patriarchal culture of Israel. Women are not supposed to approach a man in behalf of another man. Women are not supposed to speak to a man who is not her husband nor a family relative.

What Abigail did is quite radical and a major breakthrough in terms of crossing cultural barriers. If Abigail acted or reacted only within the confines and expectations of her own culture, if she simply remained quiet and passive in the midst of such critical situation, a terrible bloodshed and widespread loss of lives could have needlessly occurred. Regardless of whatever her culture may say, a woman acted and took the initiative to directly approach a stranger and plead humbly but boldly in behalf of her husband and community who are all in danger because of the foolishness of her husband. Despite cultural restrictions, a woman became a savior of her own family and community. Those who are regarded as cultural “outsiders”, like women, are themselves very vital sources of liberating voices and presence. This will set the pattern of how the one who is coming and being awaited in this advent season to become the savior-liberator is one who belongs to such category of being an “outsider” himself.

Because of obvious socio-cultural expectations regarding women in Israel, in light of the unexplained, sudden pregnancy of Mary (Matt. 1:18-24), Joseph, being a just and righteous man had actually thought of quietly divorcing Mary. He would not want to lose face before his community as a man who is going to marry a woman pregnant not with his own child. This is something very understandable in a highly patriarchal society, where manly pride and honor are always valued more highly than the welfare of women who may be in danger of simply being abandoned by the rest of the community and consigned to condemnation or possible death by stoning. Mary could have lived for the rest of her life as an ostracized single mother if not stoned to death if Joseph pursued his prior plan to quietly divorce her. But God’s ways and plans cannot be prevented from being realized by the limitations and restrictions of culture. God will act and pursue such plans using people who may even be products of such culture but who are willing to set aside such cultural restrictions for the sake of obeying and following the voice and will of God for the liberation of God’s people. Because Joseph obeyed the voice of God through an angel that spoke to him in a dream, Joseph laid aside everything and did whatever the LORD had commanded him. The rest is history of how hope was born and God’s plan was carried out in spite and despite cultural barriers which were clearly ignored and even violated by Joseph if only to obey and become a faithful instrument of God’s plans for God’s people. This decision by Joseph, marked Mary’s own liberation from an otherwise very enslaving cultural tradition.

In the Philippine context, we need to acknowledge the reality that not all marriages stemming from similar situations as that of Mary may result in a liberating experience for the woman who got pregnant. A number of such marriages may actually result to a greater degree of degradation and victimization of women. This is true especially if the marriage has been effected as mainly due to parental pressure and as a face-saving measure for the parents and for the rest of the family of the woman, and if those to be married do not have any degree of mutual love and commitment to each other. In such a context, the church must study even more carefully the situation and nature of each case and discern the kind of more redemptive options available to ensure that the woman concerned will be accorded the support that will still lead her

to a more liberating, empowering experience.

Companion Guide for the Teachers and Other Users

Culture is like second nature which is a powerful determinant of human behavior. As the prophet Isaiah said, he couldn't help but speak in sin because he was born amongst people of "unclean lips." But culture is a secondary behavior, not inborn like human instinct, hence it can be overcome. When God created humankind God said that it was good, not sinful by nature. But as sinfulness got ingrained in human culture, people came to believe that sinfulness was natural, hence the saying, "We're only human." For example, there are cultural beliefs that tend to put women at the disadvantage in the home, workplace, as well as in the church. These are often justified by a misuse of Biblical passages. The same is true of cultural bias and prejudice against LGBT people, mistaking culture to be human nature ordained by God. Thus, culture is a carrier of society's collective sins that everyone participates in.

There is also the culture that legitimizes the use of superior power, intelligence and wealth to deprive other people of the means to a decent life, condemning masses of people to extreme poverty. Philippine government statistics show that there 26 million who are poor and 12 million of which are so very poor as to be unable to eat 3 times a day. The culture of poverty among the poor makes them accept their lot in life and prevents them from taking action to change their situation.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul urged them not to be enslaved by the old life (culture) but to practice their freedom to live righteously. This means overcoming the power of sinfulness (the sinful system that makes people poor) that is embedded in culture. It means leading a transformed life every day until that new life becomes like second nature (culture) replacing the old nature (culture).

I. Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the learners are expected to:

1. Describe the present challenges of the church in transforming people by liberating them of their cultural biases
2. Share one's religious reflections that can help in transforming people from their culture-biased beliefs and practices
3. Realize that they become instruments of Christ in his salvation plan for all
4. Express one's commitment to do one's part in the church in liberating people from their cultural biases

- II. **Concept:** Jesus enjoins the adults to be part of the transformation of human beings through cultural breakthroughs.

Materials: The Holy Bible (preferably NRSV), flip cards/meta cards, outline of a tree to be drawn on the board

III. Learning Experiences

A. Opening Worship

1. Welcome time: Greet the learners with your warm smile.

2. Opening prayer: Ever living and Everlasting God, we thank you for gathering us again to learn more about you. May your Spirit be with us in understanding and applying in our lives today's lessons. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Opening song: "Beyond the Dying Sun", HFJ 391

B. Getting Ready

1. Encourage the class to recall one life experience when they were given the chance to help a friend with difficulties or be a "savior" to someone. Tell them to share details of this experience.
2. Give each learner a blank sheet or meta card. Allow them to write some cultural barriers that cause human suffering in our present situation. Prepare an outline of a tree on the blackboard. Emphasize the roots, the branches, the leaves and the fruits. Have the learners place the meta cards on the "tree". If the cultural belief is an age-old tradition, let them place the meta card at the roots. If it is a relatively contemporary cultural belief, let them place the meta card in the leaves or fruits.
3. Ask these questions.
 - a. What is the significance of the cultural beliefs in relation to the "tree"? Are there more roots than leaves or fruits?
 - b. What has more impact: cultural barriers that are age-old or cultural barriers that are more contemporary?

C. Learning Time

1. Divide the class into two groups. For group 1, let them discuss the cultural barriers found in the I Samuel text and the cultural breakthrough done by Abigail. For group 2, discuss the cultural barriers in the Matthew text and the cultural breakthrough done by Joseph.

Group 1: Exegesis of 1 Samuel 25:13-34

The story narrated in the text of 1 Samuel 25: 13-34 talks of the successful attempt of Abigail to defuse a situation in her own family and community that could have exploded into a very violent incident. It could have cost the lives of many people including that of her own husband Nabal.

Women are not supposed to approach a man in behalf of another man. Women are not supposed to speak to a man who is not her husband nor a family relative. What Abigail did is quite radical in terms of crossing cultural barriers. If Abigail acted or reacted only within the confines and expectations of her own culture, if she simply remained quiet and passive in the midst of such critical situation, a terrible bloodshed and widespread loss of lives could have needlessly occurred.

Group 2: Exegesis of Mathew 1:18-25

The story presents Joseph as a just and righteous man who had actually thought of quietly divorcing Mary because of her sudden, unexplained pregnancy. This initial decision of Joseph was rooted in the obvious socio-cultural norms regarding women in Israel at that time. For Joseph, marrying a pregnant woman not with his own child was a disgrace to the community.

D. Deepening Activity/ Sharing Time

Discuss the texts and ask these questions.

1. *Abigail humbles herself before a man and personally pleaded in behalf of her own husband. She did something unprecedented in the ancient patriarchal culture of*

Israel. Do you think adults nowadays would do the same as Abigail did? Why and why not?

2. *People who are culturally “marginalized” like Abigail are the very vital sources of liberating voice and presence.* Do you agree or not? Why?
3. *Joseph is a just, humble and righteous man but he had actually thought of quietly divorcing Mary.* Why do you think Joseph wanted to divorce Mary? What do you think were the cultural barriers Joseph was thinking about?
4. *Abigail had a brave heart and spoke boldly to David to appease his anger. For a woman, crossing cultural barriers is dangerous. Likewise for Joseph who was a just, humble, and righteous man but decided not to divorce Mary even if he had actually thought of quietly divorcing her.* How do we know that our decision to do something is the right decision. How do we know that our actions are the right actions? What are the criteria for saying that what we have done is right?

E. *Discovering the Biblical Truth*

Ask: What do you think are the present challenges of the church in its task of transforming people and liberating them of their cultural biases? How does the church promote cultural breakthroughs to transform people?

F. *Applying the Biblical Truth*

1. Have the learners read this part of the exegesis and companion guide:
 Mary could have lived for the rest of her life as an ostracized single mother if not stoned to death if Joseph pursued his prior plan to quietly divorce her. But God’s ways and plans cannot be prevented from being realized by the limitations and restrictions of culture. God will act and pursue such plans using people who may even be products of such culture but who are willing to set aside such cultural restrictions for the sake of obeying the voice and will of God for the liberation of God’s people. Because Joseph obeyed the voice of God through an angel that spoke to him in a dream, Joseph laid aside everything and did whatever the LORD had commanded him. The rest is history of how hope was born and God’s plan was carried out in spite and despite cultural barriers which were clearly ignored and even violated by Joseph if only to obey and become a faithful instrument of God’s plans for God’s people. This decision by Joseph, marked Mary’s own liberation from an otherwise very enslaving cultural tradition.
 There is also the culture that legitimizes the use of superior power, intelligence and wealth to deprive other people of the means to a decent life, condemning masses of people to extreme poverty. Philippine government statistics show that there 26 million who are poor and 12 million of which are so very poor as to be unable to eat 3 times a day. The culture of poverty among the poor makes them accept their lot in life and prevents them from taking action to change their situation.
2. Discuss:
 - Given the socio-economic context of the Philippines, how can we obey “the voice and will of God for the liberation of God’s people”?
 - How can we “ignore” or even “violate” cultural barriers just like what Joseph did “if only to obey and become a faithful instrument of God’s plans for God’s people”?
 - How can we break “the culture that legitimizes the use of superior power, intelligence and wealth to deprive other people of the means to a decent life, condemning masses of people to extreme poverty”?
3. Tell the class to comment on the following statement:

“The cultural breakthroughs envisioned by the church must be people radically transformed and who will work to contribute to the emergence of a new world. Where conflicts arise, they come as the peacemakers and peacebuilders. Where prejudice, exclusion and hatred abound, they come as bridge builders and reconcilers. Where injustice and victimization take place they come as the voice and advocates of the victims calling for justice and restitution. Where mother earth is being destroyed, they come as defenders of the integrity, balance and harmony of the whole creation. This is what a new humanity touched and empowered by the spirit of Christ can do as God’s agents of transformation and reconciliation. (Exposition of the Quadrennial Theme by the Faith and Order Commission)

2. Encourage the adults to describe their roles as parents or significant adults in their respective families, church and community and to abide by the cultural breakthroughs led by the church. Let them express their commitment through the chart below.

Cultural Barriers	My Role in Breaking
Ex. Only the educated and rich members are in the Church Council	I will nominate and vote for poor and uneducated members to be in the church council

G. *Closing Worship*

1. Offering
2. Closing song: “My Soul Magnifies the Lord”, HFJ 116
3. Closing prayer: “Thank you God for the courage of Abigail and Joseph! Thank you for the movement and sacrifice they did! Give us the courage, oh God, to do what they did. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.”

Note to the teacher: Prepare mongo plants in different stages of growth. Review now the lesson for next Sunday.

December 4, 2016

Second Sunday of Advent: **Seeds of New Humanity**

Old Testament: Isaiah 7:14

14Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

New Testament: Luke 1:26-35

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ 29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And

now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' 34Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 35The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

General Concept: Like the enslaved people in Egypt, the new humanity emerges from among the victims who long for freedom and wholeness.

Key Concept: (Adults)

Adults: Adults take the lead in helping people who long for freedom and wholeness.

Exegesis of the Biblical References

The text of Isaiah 7:14 reflects a situation of grave crisis in the life of the kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem had been under siege by a coalition of two allied kingdoms, Israel or the Northern Kingdom and the kingdom of Syria or Aram. They were coercing Judah into joining their coalition so that together they can fight the emerging superpower at that time which was Assyria. The prophet Isaiah had been advising King Ahaz of Judah not to be afraid of the coalition and not to join them, but to just remain calm and quiet. According to Isaiah, these two allied nations trying to attack them are actually just smoldering stumps of firebrands that will soon consume themselves (7:4-8). Ahaz however, appears unconvinced of the advice of the prophet. In his frustration that the king seemingly remains unaffected and unmoved by what he had been saying, the prophet then pronounced the classic statement in 7:14: "Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel". The name of the child means, "With us, is God" or God is with us. The prophet here wanted the king to realize the one abiding truth about their God Yahweh: that this God has always been with God's people, especially in times of crisis, and as sure as a pregnant woman will eventually give birth, God will continue to be with them. In times of intense political, economic and even personal crisis, the history of Israel has always been marked by the continuing interventions of God. The crisis in Ahaz time is no exception. This God of Israel has always been and will always be with God's people Israel as their liberator, redeemer, sustainer, source of power and strength. The time of the crisis in Ahaz' time however becomes somewhat special and different. This time, God's being with God's people, God being Immanuel, becomes manifested through the coming of a child. The sign of hope for Israel's redemption in a time of a grave political-military crisis will come through the birth of a baby. The assurance that God remains with God's people and will never abandon them will be the birth of a baby who will bear in a more concrete form the message of the redemption of God's people from all forces of degradation in the present and even in the future. This is what the Christian interpreters have seen in this passage that led them to connect this prophecy originally addressed to a king of Judah to become a message of hope that point to the coming of a messiah for the renewal and transformation of humanity and of the world in the form of a baby born in a manger, not a regular home, and by a peasant mother who faces the prospect of social marginalization. Hope for a new humanity is born even among those who are consigned and rendered to the margins of society by the powerful of this world.

The text in Luke 1:26-35 speaks of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary the very special privilege of being favored by God to become the mother of the messiah who will come to establish God's reign with the power of love and not of might. The messiah is described as one who will assume the greatness of David, who will establish his reign over Israel which will then

have no end. Mary was so astonished to hear such an unbelievable task being assigned to her by God, conscious of her standing in her society in Nazareth, where she is already betrothed to be married to Joseph. But the announcement of the angel indicates that she will soon conceive and bear a son even when she is still a virgin. This is why she expressed her deep surprise when she exclaimed, “But how can this be, since I have no husband?”

Again, the announcement of the angel affirms only the truth that God’s plans to save God’s people goes beyond and does not conform to social and even physical and biological expectations. God can use human instruments to carry out the divine plan independent of the expectations of society. This proclamation becomes even significant because God now will use an innocent, virgin, peasant girl to become the mother of God’s own sent son to be the messiah. The grand divine salvation plan does not occur using people with prominent status, honorable positions and names, righteous individuals. God will choose even the least, the insignificant, those considered dregs of society, victims of a highly oppressive and exploitative system, to become instruments in effecting the most radical attempt to transform and redeem humanity. From their ranks and from their voices, like the voice of Mary, we will hear and discern the emergence of a truly new humanity and a new world to be embodied in the coming of a baby born in a manger in a stable by a virgin mother who herself has been longing and praying for wholeness for her and her own people, even as she surrenders her whole life and future into the hands of her only Lord and God “Let it be!” (v.38).

Companion Guide for the Teachers and Other Users

The Hebrew people who fled Egypt were God’s “experiment of a new humanity.” Having been freed from slavery and enjoying the freedom to worship their newfound God rather than the gods of their captors, the people of Israel were meant to be a “light to the nations.” It was as though humankind was created all over again. Freedom and equality—every family given equal portions of land, no supreme ruler/king from among them but God—was established as the foundation of a new nation. The biblical faith shows that God does not allow evil and wickedness to have the last word in history. God has the last say by recreating a portion of humankind to constitute a new recreated humankind. Israel was this portion but in the end failed. The church is supposed to be the new Israel, that portion of humankind that is supposed to demonstrate the qualities of a new humanity. The church may yet fail. But we’ve seen God’s design for a new humanity—they always come from the world’s victims who continue to witness to God’s truth and righteousness (the martyrs in the Book of Revelation) not from the high and mighty. This is a never ending work of God until a new humankind will finally emerge from the face of the earth.

I. Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the learners are expected to:

1. Describe the sign mentioned by Isaiah as the hope of deliverance to the people longing for freedom and wholeness
2. Assess one’s share in bringing about freedom and equality among people in the community
3. Commit to focus on Jesus’ coming as God’s solution to the longing of the people for freedom and equality
4. Express one’s thankfulness to God for the opportunity to accompany the people in establishing freedom and wholeness

II. Concept: Adults take the lead in helping people who long for freedom and wholeness.

Materials: The Holy Bible (preferably NRSV), hymnal, different stages of the mango

seeds, 1-day sprout, 2-day sprout, 3-day sprout, 4-day sprout, 5-day sprout,
and an older plant with bigger green leaves

III. Learning Experiences

A. Opening Worship

1. Welcome time. Encourage sharing of experiences regarding their preparations for Christmas.
2. Opening prayer: "Dear God, may we experience this morning a good atmosphere of learning. May we apply our learnings in our daily life. May a new wind blow to fill us with desire and strength to help people who long for freedom and wholeness through our united action. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!"
3. Opening song: "God's Call for Today", HFJ 362

B. Getting Ready

1. Tell the class to observe the different sprouted mongo seeds. Let the class share observations regarding the plants. Allow them to discuss their observations about the plants and about the process of growth.
2. Say: The sprouted mongo signifies growth and vitality. The seeds are small but they can grow and huge changes can take place. You can eat the seeds as well as the sprouted ones. Mongo seeds sustain life. One life can be a blessing at every stage—from seed to flower to fruit.
3. Ask: What do you think is the significance of a seed in relation to the concept of transformation towards a new humanity? (Everyone, like the mongo, can contribute to transformation as children, as youth, as adults and as elderly.)

C. Learning Time

1. Let the class read the biblical texts responsibly. Allow the people to your right to start the reading, followed by the people on your left.
2. Let each of them reflect on the texts silently and individually, writing in their notebooks their short reflections.
3. Provide them copies of the exegesis and let the whole class read, one sentence per person at a time. Allow them to internalize what they have read.

D. Deepening Activity/ Sharing Time

Ask these questions.

1. What was the crisis presented in the Isaiah text?
2. What was the advice of Prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz?
3. Did King Ahaz agree to the advice of the prophet?
4. What was the pronouncement of the prophet?
5. What did the sign of the pregnant woman mean?
6. What is Mary's social origin? (She is a poor peasant or farmer)
7. Why was Mary deeply surprised upon hearing Angel Gabriel's good news?
8. How did she accept God's call? What did she say?
9. Is there a significance in Mary's social status when she was chosen to be the mother of the messiah? Why or why not?
10. What is our country's present socio-political situation? Are their similarities with that of the time of Isaiah and Luke?

E. Discovering the Biblical Truth

Ask:

1. How does God choose those who may participate in the grand divine salvation plan?
2. How can each one of you take the lead in bringing wholeness and freedom towards a new humanity?

F. Applying the Biblical Truth

1. Present the memory verse: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you....' (Luke 1: 35 b).
2. Let the students make a reflective action showing their participation in God's solution for freedom and equality among people. After finishing the exercise, have them share their thoughts with the class. Tell them to use this format.

Place	Detailed Action
Home	
Church	
Community	

G. Closing Worship

1. Offering
2. Closing song: "Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior", HFJ 118
3. Closing prayer: We thank You, our Almighty God, through Jesus Christ who was born amidst crisis to bring us wholeness and freedom. May your Spirit grant us the strength and free will to do our part in bringing freedom and wholeness. We thank you for the challenge to participate in your mission. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

December 11, 2016

Third Sunday of Advent/Human Rights Sunday: **Challenging Oppressive Powers**

Old Testament: 1 Kings 12:1-16

12Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king. 2When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard of it (for he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), then Jeroboam returned from Egypt. 3And they sent and called him; and Jeroboam and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, 4"Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you." 5He said to them, "Go away for three days, then come again to me." So the people went away.

6 Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the older men who had attended his father Solomon while he was still alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" 7They answered him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to

them when you answer them, then they will be your servants for ever.” 8But he disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. 9He said to them, “What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us’?” 10The young men who had grown up with him said to him, “Thus you should say to this people who spoke to you, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, but you must lighten it for us’; thus you should say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. 11Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’”

12 So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king had said, “Come to me again on the third day.” 13The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him 14and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.” 15So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill his word, which the Lord had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

16 When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king, “What share do we have in David?

We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.

To your tents, O Israel!

Look now to your own house, O David.”

So Israel went away to their tents.

New Testament: Luke 2:1-6

2In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

General Concept: The church has the duty to expose and challenge state policies that violate human rights.

Key Concept: (Adults)

Adults are enjoined to participate in programs that will protect the weak and the powerless to uphold their dignity.

Exegesis of the Biblical References

The text in 1 Kings recounts the story of how the once mighty and powerful United Kingdom of Israel became divided because of the highly oppressive and exploitative policies of the rulers, one manifestation of which was the imposition of heavy taxes on the people. This policy of taxation actually started with David but it became worse during the regime of his son Solomon. He was the one who employed the policy of forced labor among his own people. He created twelve districts which cut across the old tribal boundaries. He required male citizens to render free labor to the state in various infrastructure projects which really intensified during his time. Under his rule, the temple in Jerusalem was built, a dream of his father David. It was a project carried out by relying on Phoenician architecture and Phoenician timber which had to be cut

from the cedar trees in the Lebanon mountains. The cut logs would then have to be dragged down from the mountains up to the shores of the Mediterranean and then floated down off the shore southward until they reached the port of Joppa. From there, the logs were then hauled up to the mountains going to the city of Jerusalem. The enormous distance involved surely take a heavy toll on the life and safety of the people who transported the materials and constructed the temple itself (5:13-14). The temple project took seven years to complete (6:38). But Solomon even had more building projects in mind. He then proceeded to build his own palace complex which was completed in 13 years (7:1) using the same method of transporting materials and construction. There were other infrastructure projects carried out by Solomon such as a number of military fortifications. In all these, he employed forced labor from the male citizens.

At the same time, the cost of building such major infrastructure projects compelled Solomon to require an enormous amount of taxation from his people in the form of various goods and agricultural products (4:22). This was the heavy burden complained about by the people especially from those coming from the northern territories who had far richer resources than the southern region of Judah. These subjects from the north then trooped to appeal to the new king Rehoboam, the son of Solomon who had just taken over when his father died. The people of the north were hoping they would be able to receive a more humane treatment from the son of a very exploitative father. Rehoboam however, listened to the counsel of his fellow young officers in the court and ignored the advice of the elders in the palace who had been with his father Solomon. He announced in response that "If my father had beaten you with a yoke, I will now beat you up with scorpions!" (12:13). This indicates the intensification of the oppressive and exploitative taxation and forced labor policies employed by his father. The people were so enraged in hearing this and immediately they declared their cessation and rebellion from the kingdom of David and set up their own kingdom with Jeroboam as their first king (12:16-20). Major upheavals and even rebellions and divisions in a nation are normally caused by very unjust and oppressive policies of rulers. This is a reality that persists even today. This the church has to expose and oppose as part of its ministry and mission.

The story of the birth of the baby Jesus (Luke 2:1-6) has been traditionally recalled and reflected upon with very romantic and idealistic assumptions. We need to pay attention however to the fact that Jesus was born in an environment characterized by so much power abuse and unjust policies of the ruling powers then such as the Roman colonial empire. The story clearly testifies to the fact that the context of the birth of Jesus was a context filled with much suffering by the ordinary subjects of the empire such as the Jewish peasants. Jesus' parents were Jewish peasants. They were among the numerous ones who were compelled to obey a very unjust and cruel policy of requiring all subjects of the empire to be registered or fully identified right in their own places of birth. There is no exemption even for women who are heavy with child or about to give birth. Still, they have to travel to where they should register as subjects. This is one of the rigid instruments of population control by the empire as a basis for the formulation of two typical imperial concerns: the imposition of a more systematic means of taxation and at the same time of forced recruitment into the imperial army. It is either that the Jewish citizens are required to pay a uniform tax rate or they will be summoned to render service to the Roman army when it becomes necessary such as in times of war and invasion.

Thus the birth of Jesus comes right amidst a situation when the Jewish people have been crying and longing for some rescue from their very desperate and enslaving situation under the Roman colonial domination. They have been hoping and waiting for so long for the coming of a savior who would stand to expose and oppose such unjust and inhuman treatment they have been enduring under successive colonial powers. With the coming of Jesus, hope was rekindled in the hearts of the people like the shepherds who were the first ones who were able to gaze at the

sight of the newly born baby. The sight of the baby lying in the manger should not however be romanticized and frozen as the representative image of what Christmas is all about. Advent and Christmas is all about a major breakthrough in an otherwise very painful history of the Jewish people. It manifests the truth that God had not and will never abandon God's people. God will surely act even in a most unexpected way using unexpected instruments to carry out God's saving and redeeming plans for all God's children. This even in the midst of great and centuries-long historical crisis and political oppression. The rulers' abuse of their power, unjust policies and repressive measures, setting aside any minimal respect for the worth and dignity and even basic rights of their subjects, have to be brought to light as the very context of God's decisive saving action. God acted in the birth of Jesus not in an atmosphere of serene and peaceful social surroundings. God acted in a context of so much terrifying socio-economic and political crisis and victimization of peoples. This is the reason why Jesus came and the reason why the church has to carry on pursuing the mission and ministry of her Lord Jesus Christ.

Companion Guide for the Teachers and Other Users

As the late Sen. Jose W. Diokno said, human rights are those rights that make humans human. Created in God's image, every human being has this image ruined when they are robbed of their rights and dignity. Wicked people have no regard for the rights of the weak and the innocent because they do not recognize God's image that is inherent in every person. Believers in whatever faith community they belong testify to this truth about human beings as a *matter of faith*. For Christians, faith is denied when believers fail to defend human rights. Those who willfully trample on people's rights have essentially stepped out of the community of faith and would need to repent and make amends to their victims in order to be restored back to the Christian community. This is a redemptive act for human rights violators.

It is universally accepted in international law that only agents of the state can commit violation of human rights. Human rights violations must be distinguished from common crimes which are committed by citizens against fellow citizens. That is because plain citizens have no power against the state which alone holds the right to the use of armed violence. International agreements, laws and protocols on human rights are meant to protect the citizens from the state's arbitrary use of coercion and violence.

Christians believe that God's authority is over and above governments. Based on this conviction, the church has the duty to call upon the state to be compliant to God's will. The purpose is to protect the powerless and the innocent from further harm and *a/so* to help the state to be a faithful instrument to execute God's justice or else suffer God's wrath and be destroyed.

I. Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the learners are expected to:

1. Retell the stories of Rehoboam as king and Quirinius as governor
2. Discuss how these stories relate to present-day challenges in upholding human rights
3. Discuss the value given by Jesus to protect the weak and powerless
4. Analyze the programs of the church related to the upholding of human rights of people
5. Share one's resolve in upholding human rights

II. Concept: Adults are enjoined to participate in programs that will protect the weak and the powerless to uphold their dignity.

Materials: The Holy Bible (preferably NRSV), hymnal, a map of Israel in the Old

Testament times

III. Learning Experiences**A. Opening Worship**

1. Welcome time.
2. Opening prayer: Eternal God, grant us the growing desire to study your word. Guide us to participate in programs that will protect the weak and the powerless and to uphold their dignity. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Opening song: "O Come, O Come Emmanuel", HFJ 117

B. Getting Ready

1. Tell the class that this Sunday's celebration is Human Rights Sunday. Ask the adults to share their thoughts about the statements below.
 - a. Human rights are those rights that make humans human.
-Sen. Jose W. Diokno
 - b. "The world is becoming more of a neighborhood, but is it any more of a humanhood? If we don't learn to live together as brothers and sisters, we will perish together as fools."
-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
2. Summarize their answers.
3. Say: As followers of Christ, we are duty-bound to uphold human rights. Otherwise, we should not be calling ourselves Christians. We are required to live in harmony with one another and to respect one another.

C. Learning Time

1. Ask two volunteers to read aloud the biblical texts, 1 Kings 12:1-16 and Luke 2:1-6, while the others listen very carefully.
2. If there are other versions of the text, let these be read also. For example, if the texts were read in Iloco, perhaps versions in English or Tagalog may be read.
3. Let each learner write in their notebooks a paraphrase (or their own understanding) of the texts.
4. Reflect as a group what you think was happening at that time.
5. Read the Biblical Exegesis and the Companion Guide as a group to help them understand the texts even more. Using a map, show how the logs to build the temple and later on the palace were transported from Lebanon to Jerusalem. This will illustrate how forced labor was implemented.
6. Have each learner share what she/he thinks is the message of the biblical texts is for us today.
7. Tell the learners that this process that they have just done is a simplified exegesis of the texts. Encourage them to study the Bible this way.

D. Deepening Activity/ Sharing Time

Ask these questions:

1. How would you relate the story in I Kings 12:1-16 to the story in Luke 2:1-6?
2. Do you find instances of human rights violations in both stories?
3. What particular oppressive situation do you think happened during the reign of Rehoboam as king?
4. What particular oppressive rule do you think happened in the time of Quirinius as governor?
5. What do you think God's people must do in the face of oppressive and exploitative policies of rulers?

E. Discovering the Biblical Truth

Ask: What practicable actions can we do to protect the weak and the powerless and to uphold their dignity?

F. Applying the Biblical Truth

Challenge the learners to write on their notebooks one or two things they can do to protect the weak and powerless. After that, have all of them write their commitment on a sheet of manila paper with the heading: OUR COMMITMENT TO UPHOLD DIGNITY.

Ask the learners to read the following sample commitment:

*We are destined to protect the weak and powerless, by doing what is right.
We commit ourselves anew to obey God like Jesus Christ who lived in obedience to God's will and purpose.
We failed to radiate God's glory in lives before, but today and the rest of our lives, we live to do what is right and be merciful and just in dealing with our neighbors and to all God's creation.*

G. Closing Worship

1. Offering
2. Closing song: "God's Call for Today", HFJ 362
3. Closing prayer: Dear God, we thank you for giving us the courage and strength to protect the weak and powerless. May you grant us the spirituality to uphold human dignity always. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

H. Homework

1. Ask the learners to read at home the biblical texts for next week (Isaiah 49:1-3 and John 3:11-17).
2. Encourage them to practice doing simple exegesis at home.
3. Tell them that they may share what they have done at home when you meet again next Sunday.
4. Give them copies of the Biblical Exegesis and Companion Guide for next week.

December 18, 2016

Fourth Sunday of Advent: **Jesus as God's Love Incarnate**

Old Testament: Isaiah 49:1-3**The Servant's Mission**

- 1 Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
- 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
- 3 And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'

New Testament: John 3:11-17

11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven

except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'"

General Concept: In the midst of a broken humanity, God came in Jesus to mend it and make it whole.

Key Concepts for the Age Levels (Adults)

Jesus came to us to make a community composed of people who have been healed of disease, freed from the clutches of demonic powers, generous to the needy, kind to the weak, hospitable to strangers, welcoming to the outcast, forgiving to the wayward and willing to lay down our life for the sake of our friends.

Exegesis of the Biblical References

The text of Isaiah 49 comes right out of the context of the Babylonian Exile when Israel had gone through a very traumatic experience of being uprooted from their supposedly God-given land. They were forced to live in a foreign land in the midst of their captors where they have to adjust to the life of being strangers among a people worshipping a different god, living with a seemingly more advanced culture. There, they experienced being treated as second class citizens, a people without any rights, often becoming the object of derision and mockery of their own hosts-captors (e.g., Psalm 137). The reality of their being completely conquered by another nation, and the temple of their God being destroyed, their homes being razed to the ground, their women being abused and most of their men being executed (e.g., Lamentations 1-5) had simply left most of them in a deep state of shock. Earlier, these things were simply unthinkable to them. They had assumed that because they had always been the chosen and beloved people of God who had always acted to save and protect them from their enemies, no calamity can ever befall them as a nation. They simply ignored the prophecies of the prophets like Jeremiah calling for a radical change and repentance on the part of the ruling elite, for them to turn towards the ways of what is just and righteous and uphold primarily the cause of the poor and the oppressed of the land (e.g. Jeremiah 22:13-16; Psalm 72). The resulting event was a totally unexpected disaster for the nation. It marked the end of the monarchy and the end of what they thought to be an era of freedom and sovereignty as a people. They were completely broken as a people, driven on the edge of hopelessness.

Now, they are forced to face the reality of facing a very uncertain, unclear future. They see no clear, discernible end to their being a captive people. They practically have been thrown into a situation of deep darkness and confusion. The prophet of the exile however sees another possibility in the midst of this grim reality. The prophet had discerned a far more significant future for the people other than being consigned to the life of a captive people. The prophet realizes that Israel has a very important calling from her God issued right even before they were born as a nation but only hidden for the moment by God like a polished arrow waiting for a right moment to be taken out of the quiver. The Lord, in fact, had called the people to be no less than to be a servant in whom the Lord will be glorified. The matter of becoming the mouthpiece of God, the very representative of God among the nations now becomes manifested not in the form of a royal, powerful figure, not in the habiliments of nobility, nor acquiring the identity of a kingly personality. The presence of God's representative who will act to personify the just and

righteous will of the Lord for all his creatures will now be realized in the person of a servant. This will be the pattern for the way God will continue to reveal Godself in the ensuing history of God's relationship with God's people. Out of the deep darkness and brokenness of a people there will emerge a totally new act of God in the form of a servant who will come to heal the broken-hearted people through ways that are totally unexpected.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:11-17), a well-educated Pharisee, may be reflective of the gospel writer's own conflict with the Jewish leaders of his own time several decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus here describes to Nicodemus the very mystery behind the reality of the incarnation of Jesus as the Son of Man. It is this mystery of the incarnation that the Jewish elite like Nicodemus simply could not understand: that the Son of Man who was sent by God was able to ascend into heaven and was glorified and received the full reward of being a faithful servant and messiah only because he had the faith and courage to descend into the ugly realities of life here on earth. The incarnated one experienced all the contradictions, all the pain, as well as the joy and fulfillment of living the fullness of human life as an obedient son and servant of the Lord. All this is quite embedded in the mystery of what incarnation really means as an ultimate act of love of God. Jesus then pointed out that this has become possible for him to undertake only because of the love of God which he himself had personified. He knows that his presence has become the very manifestation of the deep love of God for the world, the world that is deeply imbedded in darkness and so much brokenness. It is this love of God made flesh, a love expressed in the very person of a suffering servant hanging on the cross, that has become the ultimate source of hope and light for the hopeless and those living in deep darkness. Jesus is the love of God, identifying itself with this broken and dark world. At the same time, this love of God in Jesus is the one that is also willing to sacrifice itself for the sake of his beloved. But the reality of the resurrection also reassures the faithful that this event will always stand for the love of God that is willing to empower the beloved for new life and a new future. This is the kind of God that we can always believe in and serve and witness to with all of our trust and hope for new life and a new future.

Companion Guide for the Teachers and Other Users

In Jesus of Nazareth, God came to earth to heal a broken creation. This shows the depth of God's love for God's creatures. It is the very same paradigm in which a victim—literally in the sense of Jewish sacrificial offering—suffers for the redemption of sinners. In Jesus, the sacrificial victim, God recreates humankind in a most original and novel way: Jesus, the human being, is the first and the beginning of a new being. Jesus invites everyone to follow his ways as the new human being.

By his sermons and teachings, Jesus gave the world a vision of a new human community in a new world wherein God himself will make his dwelling—the kingdom of God. This new community is composed of people who have been healed of disease, freed from the clutches of demonic powers, generous to the needy, kind to the weak, hospitable to strangers, welcoming to the outcast, forgiving to the wayward and willing to lay down their life for the sake of their friends. This is the face of the new world.

The Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) spell out the inner life and orientation of the inhabitants of the kingdom of God: the poor in spirit, those who suffer tragedy, the meek, the pure in heart, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. This vision of a new human community portrays a world that has been healed of its brokenness. Jesus founded the church ("You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church") in order to serve as his presence on earth. As Jesus was God's very presence

on earth, the church has been called and formed to be Jesus' very presence on earth through its life, work and fellowship. In and through the church, Jesus' spirit continues to mend a broken creation until God's will of a healed and reconciled creation is realized.

I. Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the learners are expected to:

1. Declare that God sent us Jesus because God loves us
2. Explain that Jesus came to heal the world
3. Describe the characteristics of a healed community
4. Make one's commitment to do one's part in healing the world through the eyes of Jesus

- II. Concept:** Jesus came to us to make a community composed of people who have been healed of disease, freed from the clutches of demonic powers, generous to the needy, kind to the weak, hospitable to strangers, welcoming to the outcast, forgiving to the wayward and willing to lay down our life for the sake of our friends.

Materials: The Holy Bible (preferably NRSV), hymnal, K-W-L (Know-Want-Learn) Chart, a simplified national situationer (appended below)

III. Learning Experiences

A. Opening Worship

1. Welcome time. Greet the learners with your warm smile.
2. Opening prayer: God of Love, we come as learners of your kingdom to listen to your instructions. Guide our teacher and guide each and one of us to come to the full knowledge of who you are, and what you are, and what you do for the sake of your beloved people. May the Holy Spirit empower us to live out our faith amidst a broken and sick world. May you help us to be a community of hope not only of the future but today in this very hour. This is our prayer in Christ's name. Amen.
3. Opening song: "We Hail You, God's Anointed", HFJ 115

B. Getting Ready

1. Present the K-W-L (Know-Want-Learn) Chart. The subject matter will be Jesus. Divide the class into two groups. Present the K-W-L chart and let each group fill up the first two columns first and the last column after discussing the lesson.

What I Know about Jesus	What I Want to Know about Jesus	What I Learn about Jesus

2. Tell each group to share with the rest of the class what they have written in the first two columns.

C. Learning Time

1. Present a simplified national situationer (see below). Ask the learners to take note of points they find striking. Let them share what they have in their notes. Summarize their answers. Say: "This is the real present day situation we have. We live in a broken and sick world."
2. Have the learners share the simple exegesis they did on Isaiah 49:1-3 and John 3:11-

17 as homework from last week.

D. Deepening Activity/ Sharing Time

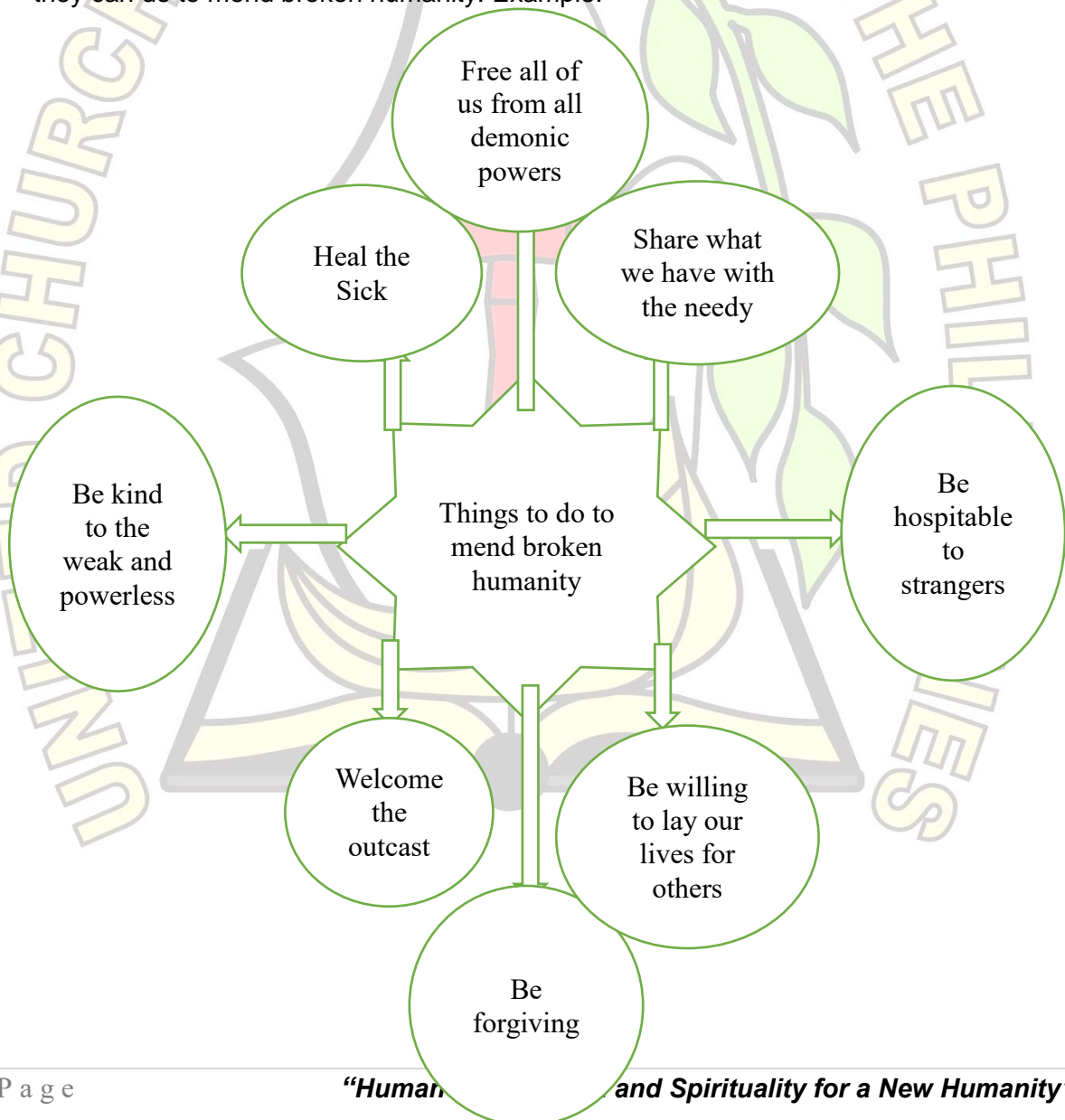
1. Back to the K-W-L Chart, have the learners regroup and continue their brainstorming and write what they learned in the third column. Plenary follows.
2. Ask these questions:
 - a. Does John's description of Jesus in John 3:11-17 support our claim that through Jesus, God is incarnated to save the broken and sick humanity? How?
 - b. What conclusions can we draw from our discussions? (God loves God's people and the whole creation that God became human in Jesus Christ.)

E. Discovering the Biblical Truth

Ask: "What did Jesus Christ do to mend broken humanity?"

F. Applying the Biblical Truth

Draw a graphic organizer on the board or cartolina or manila paper and solicit what they can do to mend broken humanity. Example:



G. Closing Worship

1. Offering
2. Closing song: "The Prophecy", HFJ 120
3. Closing prayer: Invite learners to pray silently as they thank God for God's love for all of us as shown in Jesus Christ in his lifetime and ministry. Encourage learners to ask God to empower them so they might be able to express who God is to the people they meet this coming week. Say this prayer to end: "Now we want to thank you God for the love you gave to us. Thank you for the incarnation of Jesus Christ to live with people and tell of your wonderful love. Christ lived out your unconditional love. May we, His followers, live it out too. Amen."

A Simplified National Situationer**Indigenous Peoples**

Lumád and other IP communities strongly resisting encroachment of extractive and agribusiness companies into their ancestral lands are targeted by military and paramilitary groups. The military will continue to harass and threaten the IPs. IP communities protect many ancestral lands, one of the few remaining biodiversity areas, with old growth forest that house rare species of flora and fauna. These areas are the best spots to extract gold, nickel, and copper. 97 percent of mineral production is brought out of the country. Despite the billions amassed from the mining industry in the Philippines, Lumád and other IP communities are not benefited, even with basic social services such as education and health. The present set-up of the mining industry only benefits imperialist countries at the expense of indigenous peoples and the environment. The Lumad stand firm in their position not to allow mining and logging companies to operate within their ancestral land. [Gulphing Ogan and Santi Mero]

Organized IPs from the Cordilleras to Mindanao demand to nationally industrialize the mining industry as a step forward in developing other important national industries that truly serve the Filipino people. They all assert their right to their ancestral domain and their right to self-determination.

The Environment

Not only indigenous peoples are affected by mining and logging activities. These irresponsible extractive businesses ravage the environment, affecting all of us. Those in the lowlands are not spared. We see this in the flooding during typhoons, such as what happened in Zambales during Typhoon Lando, when red-colored floodwaters laden with nickel laterite submerged communities near mining areas. Many reports of environmental investigation missions that show evidence of mining pollution by big, foreign companies have been submitted to the Mines and Geosciences Bureau, but these have not been acted upon. In these reports, mining projects with destructive environmental records have been cited such as the Tampakan mining project in Mindanao, now owned by the Alcantara and Sons (Alsons) but was previously funded by the Anglo-Swiss mining giant Glencore, the nickel mining operations of Nickel Asia, a local partner of Japanese miner Sumitomo, Toronto Ventures, and large-scale logger, DMCI. These projects also have previously assessed major environmental threats and actual adverse impacts to water, agricultural lands, fisheries, and forests. Ironically, these mining companies are all members of the Chamber of Mines, the so-called 'responsible mining' lobby group of the mining industry.

Farmers

Farmers and fisherfolk are the top two sectors with the highest poverty incidence. More than 52 million Filipinos, or 55 percent of the total population, live on a household income of less than P200 per day. No matter how hard they work, they remain the poorest in the country due to landlessness, absence of government support, and even being victims of human rights violations. The socio-economic system that operates in the countryside perpetuate this impoverished state of the rural sector that keeps the national economy from reaching its full potential [Fernando Hicap]. Nine out of 10 farmers are still landless. Vast haciendas and plantations remain undistributed, like those owned by the country's richest clans: the Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac, which is owned by the past president's clan, the Cojuangcos; the Araneta Estates in Bulacan, Hacienda Dolores in Pampanga, Hacienda Looc in Batangas; Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco's hacienda in Negros; and hundreds of thousands of hectares of plantations controlled by transnational corporations in Mindanao.

Farmers can only realize full agricultural productivity if genuine agrarian reform coupled with national industrialization will take place.

Workers

Workers still continue to call for a significant wage increase in the form of a P125 across-the-board wage hike nationwide to make up for the meager wage adjustments that were approved by the country's regional wage boards over the past decades. They also continue to call for good quality jobs. All in all, that means seven in every 10 so-called employed are in jobs that are precarious, paying low or nothing at all.

We see such a grim picture of our present national situation. What are we to do? As a church, what is our role in all these?

December 25, 2016

Christmas Day: **The Birth of Jesus**

Old Testament: Psalm 91:11

11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

New Testament: Luke 2:7-18

7And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made

known to us.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

John 1:14

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

General Concept: **We joyfully celebrate the birth of Jesus in a world that longs for fullness.**

Key Concept: (Adults)

Worshippers need to recover the original joy that the news of the messiah's birth brought: the joy of salvation, of relief, and liberation.

Exegesis of the Biblical References

Psalm 91 is a hymn expressing the highest degree of trust in the Lord, the source of abiding assurance of protection even in the gravest of all crises and dangers one may face in life. This hymn is addressed to a worshipper who is entering the sanctuary of the Lord in Jerusalem. There in the sanctuary, the worshipper experiences the presence of the Lord as a steady fortress and refuge where she or he can seek sanctuary from whatever terror or destruction is threatening her or his very own existence. The sanctuary of the Lord becomes the most secure and peaceful dwelling place for all those who trust in the Lord. Those who have grown and been nurtured in the shadow of God's sanctuary, those who have always been living in the joy of being inside the house of worship joining the community of believers in worshipping and serving God, will be the ones who will exude a distinct sense of peace and security in their life even in the midst of whatever crisis they may be facing. Their confrontation with the terrors of the night nor the deadly arrows that fly by day and other threats to their very existence as they try to live in faithful obedience to the will and mandate of the Lord will never intimidate them nor make them surrender nor compromise their faith and loyalty to the God that they confess as their only Lord and master. Their being always a part of the life and ministry of the church will certainly make a difference in the kind of life they will live, the kind of behavior they will manifest each day, the kind of relationship they will keep and nurture and the kind of values and concerns and advocacies they will uphold and fight for.

The text in John 1:14 declares in a very short but very profound language the truth about the coming of Jesus on Christmas day. Jesus is the Word of God that has become “flesh” and has dwelt among us. This is what John and the other disciples have beheld in their experience of encountering Jesus in his life and ministry. The “flesh” that God has indeed become is the full manifestation of the glory of the Son from the Father. Here lies the reality as well as mystery of the Incarnation: God took on the full identity of an ordinary human being and became identified as a true and ordinary human who dwelt among fellow humans right in a particular time and place in history. God became involved in the concrete affairs of ordinary human beings as a fellow human being, having his own family, enjoying the company of friends, or “barkada”, enjoying being with people and at the same time, discerning well the things that are wrong and the things that need to be changed in his own society and the kind of people who he knew needed the priority attention of God. These are the people who are crying for healing, for restoration and the fullness of liberation. Jesus revealed the fullness of the nature of God as a God who loves people and who cares for people especially the downtrodden. This is the most ironic mystery and paradox of this revelation. Those who decided to follow Jesus as their Lord

have truly discerned and beheld the truth that in him, in this very ordinary human being, who even suffered and died as an innocent victim of false accusations, is revealed the depth and meaning of the glory of what it means to be the Son of a loving God. Perhaps this is the reason why the gospel of Luke, in relating the story of the birth of Jesus, also disclosed one very significant information about this event: that the very first people to whom the good news of the birth of the son of God was revealed were the shepherds. They are people identified among the underclasses of Jewish society, those considered among the unlettered, uneducated and good only for being hired to take care of the sheep, those who have no real capacity to rise from poverty and the depravity of their situation, and have no power to question nor even change their fate at the moment. But it is the shepherds who would soon reveal the fullness of God's glory. They will share the good news about the son of God, the good news that hope finally has come, and that their life and lot is now about to be transformed by the fact that they themselves have become so empowered enough to bring and share this good news of hope to others. For people of their kind, truly, the coming of Jesus is something that is indeed worth celebrating in all its fullness.

Companion Guide for the Teachers and Other Users

For the masses of humanity since time immemorial, there has been more sadness than joy on earth. There are many faces of sadness even as the cry of the suffering people has reached heaven. And so in the midst of a sorrowing world, God sent the world a bundle of joy—Jesus. It is part of the church's profound discernment to have pictured Jesus' humble birth as a joyous event: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

But perhaps the kind of joy that the present world feels about Christmas may not be the same kind of joy that the shepherds and the heavenly messengers felt. For the lowly shepherds, the announcement of the birth of the messiah meant an answer to their longings for relief from a life of poverty, laborious toil and humiliation. For hundreds of years, the people of Israel had longed for respite from endless wars brought upon the nation by imperial domination. Some had hoped that a heavenly messiah would descend from heaven to establish God's reign of justice, peace and prosperity. For those who saw no end to a life in misery, the news of the final arrival of the savior messiah was gospel, good news indeed.

In the contemporary world, the essence and message of Christmas may have been lost in the glitter of a secular and commercialized world. Even the church may have missed the point that the Nativity Scene that is being reenacted on Christmas Eve is actually a counterpoint to the holiday scene outside in the larger world. The humble scene of a new-born babe in a manger comes in sharp contrast to the crowd who are dressed in their best attires. It is important for worshipers to recover the original joy that the news of the messiah's birth brought: the joy of salvation, of relief and liberation. But, of course, only those who knew life below and in the periphery would be longing for salvation as shepherds did.

I. Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the learners are expected to:

1. Describe the original joy of the news of the birth of Jesus
2. Resolve to recover that original joy of Jesus' birth
3. Explain the meaning of joy in relation to salvation, relief, and liberation of God's people
4. Refrain from using the birth of Jesus for its commercial value
5. List ways of expressing one's joy upon the coming of Jesus

- II. Concept:** Worshipers need to recover the original joy that the news of the messiah's birth brought—the joy of salvation, of relief, and liberation.

Materials: The Holy Bible (preferably NRSV), hymnal, drawings of a smiley face and a frowning face for each learner, two-column note

III. Learning Experiences

A. Opening Worship

1. Welcome time.
2. Opening prayer: Gracious God, give us the strength to do your will as we study your Word. You have given us the task to proclaim Your Gospel. Help us to do it with diligent hearts and minds. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.
3. Opening song: "Joy to the World"

B. Getting Ready

1. Prepare the class to play a game "Are You Happy or Not?". Distribute a smiley face and a frowning face to each learner. Read aloud the statements below and let them raise a smiley face if they are happy with the statement and a frowning face if the statement makes them sad.
 - a. "Joy to the world the Lord has come, Let earth receive her King!"
 - b. Christmas is a time of extravagant buying of shoes, dresses and expensive gifts.
 - c. In the midst of a sorrowing world, God sent the world a bundle of joy—Jesus.
 - d. We eat so much food and drink so much liquor during Christmas.
 - e. In these contemporary times, the essence and message of Christmas has been lost in the glitter of a secular and commercialized world.
 - f. The church may reenact the simple but joyous Nativity Scene on Christmas Eve and really internalize its meaning to counterpoint the holiday scene outside in the larger world.
 - g. Caroling, giving, sharing, loving are the themes during Christmas day only.
 - h. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!
 - i. The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
 - j. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
2. After the game, ask the class.
 - a. How were you able to answer our game? Did you find it easy or hard?
 - b. What will the world look like if there was genuine joy and happiness? How would you feel?
 - c. What can you do in order to make this world a better place for everyone, especially the poor and marginalized?
 - d. What is God's plan for our world? Will it bring us the original joy that the shepherds felt at that first Christmas?

C. Learning Time

1. Let the students read the two biblical references.
2. Together as a class, do a simplified exegesis of the texts.
 - a. Carefully read the texts.
 - b. If there are other versions of the text, let these be read also.

- c. Let each learner write in their notebooks a paraphrase (or their own Understanding) of the texts. Have each one share with the whole class.
- d. Reflect as a group what you think was happening at that time.
- e. Read the Biblical Exegesis and the Companion Guide as a group to help them understand the texts even more.
- f. Have each learner share what she/he thinks is the message of the biblical texts is for us today.

D. Deepening Activity/ Sharing Time

Discuss the lesson and ask these questions.

1. How did Luke expound the feeling of joy and excitement felt by the shepherds? How can we recover the original joy felt by the shepherds?
2. Compare the narration of John and of that of Luke in relation to the coming of Jesus on Christmas day.

E. Discovering the Biblical Truth

Ask: "How can worshipers recover the original joy of salvation, of relief, and liberation that the news of the messiah's birth brought?"

F. Applying the Biblical Truth

Let the students make a reflective action showing their participation in restoring the original joy of the first Christmas. After finishing the exercise, have them share their thoughts with the class. Tell them to use this format.

PLACE	DETAILED ACTION IN RESTORING JOY
1. HOME	
2. CHURCH	
3. COMMUNITY	

G. Closing Worship

1. Offering
2. Closing song: "Joy to the World"
3. Closing prayer: Ask each learner to say a short prayer of commitment as their part in restoring the original joy of salvation, of relief, and liberation felt by the shepherds.

January 1, 2017

First Sunday after Christmas: **Defending Children, Symbols of a New Beginning**

Old Testament: Isaiah 43:18-19

18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

New Testament: Matthew 2:1-16

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Escape to Egypt

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

The Massacre of the Infants

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

General Concept: Upholding the rights and welfare of children makes a just and compassionate society now and in the future.

Key Concept: (Adults)

Jesus' message to us is to make a child-friendly society that will pave the way to a bright future for all.

Exegesis of the Biblical References

Our Old Testament text in Isaiah 43:18-19 speaks of the prophet's prophecy of the new things that God is doing and is certain to be realized. It is something that can already be perceived in what is happening around. This is an announcement of a radical change of paradigm on the way God's ways and actions are to be perceived and understood by God's people. God is rapidly making a way in the desert wilderness of the people's maze of traditions and beliefs. The Israelites had a basic orientation

- of being so rooted in the memories of a saving past as in the Exodus event,
- of being so anchored with misplaced pride on the exclusive claims of the Sinai covenant,
- of being so deluded with the thought of being an exclusively chosen people of God,
- of making the false assumption that Israel is solely the recipient of God's redeeming and protecting grace and power to the exclusion of all others.

From this basic orientation, the prophet now calls the attention of his fellow exiles in Babylon to seriously re-examine such questionable faith assumptions. This is in light of events that just took place in their history.

Now they are a defeated, humiliated, completely dominated people, vanquished by another nation which conquered them in the name of another god. Their old assumptions, their reliance

on the old traditions, their old faith understanding now become seriously questioned and undermined. Not a few could have been tempted to surrender and compromise even their faith convictions and just embrace the seemingly more advanced, more sophisticated culture, political and religious assumptions, practices and beliefs of their Babylonian conquerors. How can one assert the truth, power and claims of one's own beliefs if they are now living in the midst of a foreign culture whose religion and deities seem to have overpowered their own covenant God in Yahweh? Could Marduk be indeed more powerful than our God Yahweh? If this is not true, then why did Yahweh allow their own downfall as a chosen people? Why did God allow the temple and their beloved holy city of Jerusalem to be destroyed and burned? Why did our covenant God allow us, the religious and political leaders of our land to be thrown into a most humiliating and degrading exile and be left fending for ourselves, completely disoriented, confused, in so much despair in a land which is not our home? Why does the way of Yahweh appear so hidden and our basic covenant rights seemingly completely disregarded by this God? (cf. Is. 40:27)

Here, the prophet proclaims one very decisive turning point in the understanding of their faith. God remains actively working but in completely new ways towards the eventual renewal and restoration of Yahweh's people. No need to pin our hopes on the old assumptions and old paradigms. The Lord now is making a way through otherwise completely surprising and even shocking new means, where the impossible will now become so possible, where the unrealizable will soon be fulfilled. This is where there will be a turning upside down of the most cherished and preserved of the faith traditions of the people. This is where the mystery of the redeeming power of God is to be fully revealed in the very near future. This is what will constitute the completely shocking good news that the Gospel will soon be proclaiming.

In the New Testament text in Matthew 2:1-16, it turns out that the coming of this shocking good news will not be a smooth, resistance-free process. The more this comes as a shock because right in this story in Matthew, this Good News is revealed first to gentile peoples, those who had not really confessed belief in the God of Israel. They are the wise men from the East. They are practitioners more of the religion connected with the stars, concerned more with reading and discerning the future through the movements of heavenly bodies. In this particular occasion however, they discerned something more vital, something more historically significant than they could ever imagine. They just discerned from the heavens a sign of the new thing that God is doing in the history of Yahweh's people. The promised new thing now comes in the form of a baby born in the humblest and most deprived of conditions; not in and through any claims to power and connection to royal assumptions and positions. The promised new thing is just a baby as fully discerned by an unbelieving group of astrologers. The gift of discernment is never a monopoly of those who claim to be God's people. Others who do not share such claim can also be recipients of an even more profound discernment of liberating truth, not just from scripture, but also from historical and natural phenomena around them. There are times they can be even more sensitive and serious thinkers about life and faith than those who profess such faith.

But then, this new thing as discerned by non-believers immediately created a sense of alarm and panic on the part of those who have power and vested interests to protect. Those who benefit so much from the maintenance and preservation of highly unjust and oppressive conditions of those they dominate and control. There will always be Herods who will undertake all means to stop and prevent the coming of the new even to the extent of using deception and employing their own paid wise men to make counter-discernments to detect the location or the birth of the new. There will always be resistance from those who are threatened by the dawning of the new. But the story is so clear in what is being proclaimed. The coming of the new that will

serve as liberating good news for the oppressed can never be stopped nor be suppressed at all. The Herods even of our time may even employ the most violent means of repressing and silencing the possible sources of new hope like newly born babies. But God's ways, acting according to the redemptive and liberating will of this God, can never be stopped by any human scheme. This is the source of the springs of hope of an otherwise hopeless people. An otherwise seemingly innocent-looking powerless baby actually becomes the revelation of God's real power and grace. To defend and protect the life and future of babies and all children is to protect and ensure the coming of the new, purely a gift of God.

Companion Guide for the Teachers and Other Users

Children are symbols of the future. And what the world does to the children foretells the world's future. A society that is kind to children, that gives them space to play and grow, that invests in schools that teaches them to "do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with their God" (Micah 6:8), builds a world that is safe, friendly, hospitable, generous and where goodwill fills the air. The world builds a future world worthy of human habitation by defending its children from harm and abuse now.

The prophetic image of "the child shall lead the way" expresses this truth. Children indeed are leading the way to a free and bright future. Jesus' words, that unless people become like children they cannot enter the kingdom of God, say it all. Since the kingdom points to a future prepared by God, Jesus' message is that making a child-friendly society today paves the way to the realization of a bright future for all.

I. Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the learners are expected to:

1. Describe a child-friendly society
2. Explain that protecting children is part of God's message in paving a bright future for all
3. Realize the importance of protecting children
4. Demonstrate ways of protecting children
5. Resolve to be involved in promoting the welfare of children

II. Concept: Jesus' message to us is to make a child-friendly society that will pave the way to a bright future for all.

Materials: The Holy Bible (preferably NRSV), different pictures of children in trouble or children abused/exploited, examples: pictures depicting child labor, pictures of street children, children in the dump site, children corporally punished

III. Learning Experiences

A. Opening Worship

1. Welcome time: Greet each other a Happy New Year!
2. Opening prayer: Our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of Life, we thank you for this new year. Thank you for the year just passed and for all the opportunities of serving You and Your people. We know You usher us into this new year with renewed vitality to continue in your mission. Thank you for always being with us. Amen.
3. Opening song: "I was There to Hear Your Borne Cry", HFJ 45

B. Getting Ready

1. Have each learner get one picture each of children in abusive situations. Tell them to say something about the picture and share ways by which children can be protected in the specific situation depicted by the picture. After sharing, have them paste on manila paper or on the board. Have them form a collage.
2. Say: Today we will talk about how our response should be as church people vis-à-vis the plight of children in our collage.

C. Learning Time

1. Let the class read the biblical references responsibly. Start the reading then the learner next to you can follow and so on.
2. Distribute a copy of the following poem. Group the class into three: the first group will discuss the section Yesterday, the second group will discuss the section Today, the third group will discuss the section Tomorrow. Give them 10 minutes to discuss. Let each group present a pantomime or skit of what they discussed.

“The Children Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”

(Written by Ms. Elsie Joy de la Cruz)

Yesterday,

I hear the children laughing, singing, giggling while having fun
 I see them running, dancing, climbing trees and playing house
 I smell their fresh hair after bath and sweet breath when they kiss
 I feel the warmth of their hugs and the sincerity of their embrace.

Today,

I hear the cries of children who are hungry, and afraid
 because of being sexually and psychologically abused.
 I see their bruised bodies being beaten up, callous hands
 working for food and soiled feet begging for alms on the streets.
 I smell the stinkiness of their unwashed clothes and
 rotteness of their unbathed bodies sleeping anywhere.
 I feel the coldness of their touch asking for money and
 the questioning looks in their eyes.

Tomorrow,

I am afraid that:

We can no longer hear children laughing and singing
 because their voices are suppressed with bitterness of their pains.
 We can no longer see them playing with other kids in the neighborhood
 because they are now imprisoned in the cells of prostitution and addiction.
 We can no longer feel the warmth and sincerity of their embraces
 because their emotions are betrayed by suspicions and fears.
 We can no longer see them sharing their toys and food with other children
 because they are now influenced by the greediness and
 individualistic attitude of the adults that surround them.
 What then will our future if these are our children of today?

D. Deepening Activity/ Sharing Time

Discuss:

1. How did the Prophet Isaiah envision new things and radical change?
2. God uses a powerless baby to be a revelation of God's real power and grace [from the biblical exegesis]. Babies and children then become symbols of hope for the future. As church people, what should we do to defend and protect them, thereby

ensuring the future of this world?

3. Do you agree with the poem just read and portrayed?

E. Discovering the Biblical Truth

Ask:

- How does a child-friendly society look like?
- How should the church participate in making a child-friendly society that will pave the way to a bright future for all?

F. Applying the Biblical Truth

1. Let the learners write on their notebooks what they will do to contribute to making a child-friendly society today. Allow them to share their thoughts with the rest of the class.

G. Closing Worship

1. Offering
2. Closing song: "The Old Year Has Come and Gone, Lord", HFJ 349
3. Closing prayer: Dear God, in the new year, help us pave the way for a brighter future for all of us and especially for all children. May we always be your instruments for the establishment of your reign of love, peace, justice and equity. Strengthen our resolve to push on, even if the going gets rough. Be with us, guide us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

