

SPIRIT

PRAY

God, you are always with us at work in our lives. Help us change what keeps us from sharing the joy of Christmas. May our love more and more abound and hold our human family together. Amen.

25 Ways to Live Advent

Say hello to God.

Imagine Christmas without things.

Talk with your dad for 10 minutes.

Listen to what you hear.

Compliment a classmate.

Encourage somebody.

Contribute to Toys for Tots.

Dance

Consider another person's good points.

Collect food or presents for families in need.

Talk with your mom for 10 minutes.

Ask an older person what he or she thinks.

Share your lunch.

Pop popcorn.

Read more.

Clean your room.

Volunteer to help someone in need.

Attend a Christmas play.

Serve a meal at a shelter.

Reconcile with a friend.

Make an Advent wreath.

Turn off the TV and talk.

Say "I love you."

Lead daily prayers

Laugh with your family.

The cast wrestled with questions about forgiveness every day as they participated in The Amish Project, a one-act play by Jessica Dickey. The play tells the true story of the horrific killings of Amish girls in Nickel Mines, PA, in 2006.

A man who lived in the community entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse and shot the girls, then killed himself. Five girls died, five survived. Almost immediately after the shootings, the Amish community issued a statement forgiving the gunman and offering condolences to his family.

The play explores how this appalling violence, and this astonishing

forgiveness, rippled through the larger community. The actors from Buffalo High School in Buffalo, Minnesota, took their play and its questions to state competition.

JULIE: How has being in this play made a difference in your lives?

TRACY (the director): I chose this play because it portrays the faith and culture of Amish people and demonstrates one of the most ultimate acts of forgiveness. I was amazed at the way this show shaped me and shaped the kids.

ERICA: I'm usually not a forgiving

FORGIVENESS: THE BIG QUESTION

Interview by Julie Surma



What would Jesus forgive?

Are some things unforgivable?

Am I a forgiving person?

Is forgiving the same as forgetting?



person. I tend to hold grudges. Now there are very few people that I haven't forgiven.

ANNA: Being in this play makes me think if they can forgive, I can forgive. And if I do get angry I feel like a hypocrite because I am in this play that's all about forgiveness and if I can't forgive, I feel dumb.

LIZA: I realized the similarities between the Amish faith and ours. It's all Christianity. It can be easy to push them away because they have a separate culture and way of living. But this made me feel accepting of their faith.

JULIE: The Amish are radical forgivers. Could you forgive like them? Do you forgive like them?

ANDY: The play has drastically changed my view on how to forgive someone, how to deal with revenge and feelings of vengeance.

EMMA: I want to say yes, but I can't know if I'd really do it unless I'm put in the situation.



KATIE M.: It's gotten a little easier to forgive people. Now when someone does something I just think, "I should probably forgive them." It feels like a big weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

ERICA: I've learned to forgive but not forget. I'm not going to forget what happened or what they might have done. But, I can't just hold a grudge forever.

ANNA: It's not worth it being bitter and holding on to things because it hurts me more than the other person. I need to be reminded of that when I am in those situations.

TRACY: To prepare for the show we watched a movie about this incident, The Big Question. It illustrated the struggle one of the girl's father went through. There were two sides to his struggle. The first was, "I'm so mad I want to kill the killer; my heart is broken." The second was, "I know that I need to forgive him or it's going to destroy my life." It wasn't easy, but he forgave him.



JULIE: Do you see any examples of this kind of forgiveness around you? Do you think it's realistic?

ANNA: It is possible. If the world were really like that, we'd have less war and violence. But we haven't grown up like that and learned to forgive like that.

ERICA: We strive for it, but it's hard. If someone I love were murdered, I would have a hard time instantly forgiving the person. It's rare.

JULIE: I recently read a story in the newspaper about a woman who was run over and killed by a drunken driver as she was walking along the sidewalk with her friend. She was the only parent left because her husband had died just a few months earlier from cancer. And it was amazing! Her family came out publicly and said, "We forgive the driver and extend condolences to her family."

ANDY: It's out there, just scarce. Revenge seems more instantly pleasurable than forgiveness. People think that revenge is the best route when ultimately it isn't very healthy.



SUNDAY GOSPEL

2nd Sunday of Advent

The Baptist prepares Jesus' way.

NARRATOR: In the 15th year of the rule of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea; Herod, the ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of the region around Ituraea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, the ruler of Abilene; when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests—the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

John went about the whole area around the Jordan River preaching.

JOHN: Turn away from your sins and be baptized. If you turn to God, God will forgive you.

NARRATOR: When people heard John, they remembered what was written in the book of the prophet Isaiah.

ISAIAH: A herald's voice in the desert cries out: "Make ready a road for God. Clear a straight path for God to travel. Every valley shall be filled; every mountain and hill shall be leveled. The windings shall be made straight and rough ways smooth, and all humankind will see the salvation of God."

Luke 3.1-6



JULIE: I think being forgiven brings up the question of self-forgiveness. It asks that we give up our own self-hatred for what we did. For whatever reason, we often want to hang on to that.

LIZA: I can see that. We don't forgive ourselves for the stupid things we have done. We think, "How could I do that? It was so stupid! I'm never going to forgive myself."

ERICA: I have received a lot of forgiveness! I have many friends in this room, and they've probably forgiven me countless times. But then there are the big things.

ANNA: There is a kind of joy you feel when you are forgiven...it's actually a hard feeling to describe. You just feel really happy.

KATIE C.: I think today's society encourages us not to forgive. There are more stories about getting revenge, and how it makes you feel better. But it just damages you further.

ANNA: I told one of my friends about this play and she said, "Some things just are not forgivable." And I thought, "What things are those?" Because, as a Christian, if I believe that Jesus forgives me for everything, how can things other people do be unforgivable?

ERICA: If the Amish can forgive a man for killing their daughters, how can we not forgive someone for doing something less hurtful than that? Nothing is unforgivable to me now.

JULIE: Have any of you received this kind of big forgiveness? I think that's the other side of the coin. We don't talk about what it feels like to receive forgiveness.

ANDY: The characters that were forgiven, like the character I played, find themselves hating the fact that they were forgiven because it's not "normal."

QUESTIONS

- 1 How forgiving a person are you?
- 2 How has being forgiven made you feel?
- 3 What, if anything, is unforgivable?
- 4 Could you forgive the five murders as the Amish did? Why?
- 5 What examples of forgiveness do you see around you?
- 6 How is forgiving a way to turn toward God?

Prophets promise Israel's return from exile.

Advent prepares us to celebrate Jesus' birth, God becoming human and making a home among us. The Advent first readings brim with the joy of Israel's homecoming from exile.

Homecomings are joyous events. A school homecoming gathers together classmates who scatter after graduation and reconnect and catch up on each others' lives. Alumni get to see what's new at the old school building and remember their fun together.

Family reunions or Christmas dinners also bring scattered family together. Cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents gather often at the family home. In these gatherings younger family members discover their roots.

Israel's exile and return home shapes the people of God almost as much as the exodus, the escape from slavery in Egypt. In fact, the prophets whose words we read this Advent see the return from exile as a second exodus. The God who led the Hebrew slaves on a dry path through the sea to freedom opens a road home for the exiled Israelites through the wilderness 400 years later.

The exile begins in 587 B.C., when the Babylonians destroy the city of Jerusalem after a long siege. The Babylonians knock down the city walls and topple the Temple. The ruins become the haunt of jackals. The Babylonians force the most able-bodied laborers into exile a thousand miles away. They march them to their capital city—Babylon, the city of Baghdad today.



For nearly 50 years these Israelites live in exile—two generations. Many people made a new life doing metal crafts and interpreting for the Babylonians in government and business. Israelite children grew up who had never seen their homeland.

Israel's religion might have died out in a foreign land. The priests in exile collected and wrote down the laws, stories, and traditions the people had passed down orally. These writings formed the Old Testament. The people who no longer had a temple gathered to listen to the scriptures.

In 540 B.C., the Persians, who came from the area that is Iran today, defeated the Babylonians. A prophet named Second Isaiah saw in this defeat God opening a way home from Babylon. Second Isaiah began to call the people in exile to get ready to return home and be a people again.

Second Isaiah's prophetic words have become famous. "Prepare the way of the Lord," he preached. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain made low" (Isaiah 40.3-5).

Nearly 600 years later when John the Baptist begins to preach, people hear an echo of Second Isaiah's famous image of God leading the people home through the wilderness. In our time the musical Godspell begins with the same message in song: "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord."

Our first readings during Advent remember and celebrate Israel's homecoming and their experience of God's faithfulness to them as a people. This Sunday the prophet Baruch imagines Israel's homecoming:

Arise, O Jerusalem,
stand upon the heights;
Look toward the east,
and see your children

The Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets. Nicene Creed



gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God
has remembered them.
They went out from you on foot
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back....

For God has ordered
that every high mountain
and the everlasting hills
be made low
and the valleys filled up,
to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk
safely in the glory of God.

Baruch 5.5-7

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 **What is important about Israel's exile and return home? How do the words of the prophets help us prepare for Christmas?**
- 2 **Light your Advent wreath. Imagine the experience of exile and return home. Share experiences of moving to a new place or going away for an extended camp or mission trip. How did you feel in the new place? What did you miss from home? What made you feel more at home in the new place? Pray together for those on the move this Advent. Read Baruch 5.5-7 together.**
- 3 **Create a group poem or vision of hope by having each group member choose a favorite line from a popular song, write it large on a sheet of paper, and work together to compose a new lyric or new vision.**